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Costa Rodrigues**

**Representações afro-americanas no cinema dos
anos 80 e início dos 90**

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80s and early 90s**



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À minha filha e ao meu marido

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Palavras-chave

Afro-americanos, representação, cinema, inferioridade.

Resumo

Esta dissertação examina vários retratos dos afro-americanos nos filmes dos anos 80 e início dos anos 90. Deste modo, as diferentes representações no cinema, incluindo as de Hollywood e produções independentes afro-americanas, são exploradas e contrastadas. Pretendemos provar que, embora as representações dos afro-americanos tenham sofrido algumas mudanças ao longo dos tempos, elas ainda estão confinadas a posições de inferioridade em relação aos seus colegas brancos. Esta dissertação inclui uma abordagem aos principais conceitos associados à raça e à representação, uma reflexão sobre as diferentes descrições dos negros no cinema desde o começo das produções cinematográficas até ao início dos anos 90. Abrange igualmente, um fundo histórico para o período específico de estudo e algumas reflexões sobre os diferentes temas focalizados por Hollywood e por importantes cineastas negros. A pesquisa analisa a prática de estereótipos de uma variedade de géneros cinematográficos.

Keywords

Afro-Americans, representation, cinema, inferiority.

Abstract

This dissertation examines the various portrayals of Afro-Americans in the movies of the 80s and early 90s. In doing so, the different representations in cinema, including those of Hollywood and independent African Americans' productions, are explored and contrasted. I argue that although representations of Afro-Americans have undergone changes, they are still confined to positions of inferiority when compared to their white counterparts. This dissertation includes a review of key concepts associated with race and representation, a reflection on the different depictions of blacks in cinema from the early days of filmmaking to the early 90s, a historical background to the specific period studied and some thoughts on the different themes focused on by Hollywood and by prominent black filmmakers. The practical research looks at a stereotyping in a range of film genres.

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Introduction

As the history of Humankind is made up of events both laudable and shameful connected with our progress towards modern forms of social organization, it is essential for us, the people of the 21st century, to be aware of the mistakes of the past in order not to repeat them in the present. Unfortunately this is not always the case, since people have tended to perpetuate their mistakes instead of trying to avoid them.

Right from the very moment Afro-Americans (as well as other ethnic minorities) set their feet on the American continent; they were looked upon as being different from the rest of the population who were white. Consequently they have experienced oppression for centuries. I have always had some interest in studying racial issues for I find it difficult to understand why discrimination against a people, in this case people of African origin, could have been perpetuated for reasons based upon spurious ethical, historical, cultural, social, political, economic and geographical arguments.

Furthermore I have always been interested in Afro-American culture due to the musical, literary and especially cinematic representations which I have become acquainted with. But representations are not necessarily accurate and truthful, they are interpretations of reality often heavily influenced by ideological preconceptions, so it is important to concentrate on how Hollywood figures have chosen to interpret and construct Afro-Americans in movies. Furthermore it is essential to analyze whether the key stereotypes pointed out by Donald Bogle in his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks* have persisted and are still prevalent in contemporary films. Hence I decided to identify and explore African-American representations in the cinema of the 1980s and early 90s to deepen my knowledge on how Hollywood has perceived and portrayed (mainly male) blacks and to prove that some prominent black filmmakers, along with a couple of Afro-American actors, the social consciousness of audiences and political activism have been responsible for the changes that have occurred over the years.

The first chapter of this dissertation consists of a broad cultural review of some racial theories so as to identify the different meanings for the terms 'race', 'ethnicity' and 'stereotypes'. Along with this, there has to be some reference to the different categorizations of peoples into different stocks, carried out by several anthropologists and biologists of the past. Right from the very beginning of the film industry, blacks were both

stereotyped and marginalized, always positioned as the 'Other'. In this sense an absolute dichotomy between black and white was established right from the start. So this chapter also focuses on the different connotations of the words 'black' and 'white' and on the powerful impact perceptions had and still can have on society in general.

The second chapter provides a reflection on the different portrayals of Afro-Americans on screen from the early days of Hollywood productions to the end of the seventies. Thus the chapter focuses on the different stereotypes which according to Bogle (2004) have persisted ever since the very first motion pictures. Moreover some reference is made to the work and contribution of the first influential black filmmakers of the time, as well as to some black performers, who were responsible for the major changes which occurred in the film industry during this time span.

The third chapter presents a historical background to the eighties so as to explain the reasons why the exploration of racial discontent within American society was a no-go-area for Hollywood films. Throughout the chapter there will be offered a detailed analysis of films which belong to different genres, including interracial buddy, comedy, and action-adventure films, in order to highlight the importance of this decade in not only leading many Afro-American actors to stardom, but also in focusing on the concern of the industry to produce films for both black and white audiences, yet never significantly challenging the existing social and racial order.

Finally chapter four provides a detailed analysis of six of Spike Lee's features (*She's Gotta Have It*, *School Daze*, *Do The Right Thing*, *Mo' Better Blues*, *Jungle Fever* and *Malcolm X*). It also focuses on Lee as an Afro-American who dared to challenge Hollywood codes and practices and who insists on organizing and carrying out his projects with *his* vision and with the minimum of interference. In this sense it analyses various themes, including critical issues such as race relations, political activism, urban crime and violence. As this Black New Wave filmmaker uses his films as communication tools to provoke discussion and debate, there is an attempt to explore precisely what is innovative about his work. Finally I will try to assess just how much progress has been made in this sensitive area of social representation.

Chapter One

Race and Representation in American Culture

To avoid or ignore the different representations of Afro-Americans in Hollywood films is to avoid and ignore a fundamental part of the history of U.S. cinema. In his article “The Re-birth of the Aesthetic in Cinema”, Clyde Taylor highlights:

[f]or obscure reasons, narrative works considered landmarks in American culture for technical innovation and/or popular success have often importantly involved the portrayal of African Americans. (1996: 15)

Indeed, there are three very important films that set the stage for black representation in early mainstream cinema: *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith, 1915), *The Jazz Singer* (Crosland, 1927) and *Gone with the Wind* (Selznick, 1939). *The Birth of a Nation* represents not only a culturally mainstreamed dehumanization and ‘Othering’ that moves beyond the issues of race, to those of power and the maintenance of power, but also an essential breakthrough for subsequent filmmaking technique; *The Jazz Singer* is known as the first sound film and *Gone with the Wind* made history as a technicolor historical epic.

Throughout history the depictions of blacks in films have been constantly updated so as to maintain the dominant ideology and resist any notions that are contrary to what is presented by Hollywood as normative¹. While on the one hand there have been some concessions made on the screen, on the other hand the clichés and discriminations of the past, in one form or in another, have usually been revived and redeployed by the dominant ideology. Hence the odious myth of ‘white supremacy’ has been perpetuated over the years.

On the whole American films provide a historical examination into the psyche of American culture regarding the representations of race, class and gender. The

¹ It is important to understand that the representation of African American life is not a static phenomenon. Whereas the dominant ideology may remain the same, the manifestation and practice of dominant power structures adapt in order to maintain authority.

commodification of the black masculine image pertaining to its representation in film is usually framed as a sexual taboo, social menace or consumable product. The presence of black bodies in film symbolically represents a reductive conceptualization of blackness through consumerism and mythification. As critic Bill Yousman points out, “historians like Bogle [2004] argued that images of sexually dangerous Black men have been the norm since the advent of electronic mass media in the U.S.

The black brute was a barbaric black out to raise havoc. Audiences could assume that his physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed. In *The Birth of a Nation*, the black brutes, subhuman and feral, are the nameless characters setting out on a rampage full of black rage (13)”. (Yousman 2003: 385)

As Wilkins suggests, “Color consciousness» (and more specifically white supremacy) has been a dominant feature of the American saga since the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock.” (Wilkins 1996: 4). The indigenous Native American population was exterminated, millions of Africans were kidnapped and enslaved and Japanese-Americans were held in internment camps during World War II. All this was carried out by people (Americans) who believed they were acting in the name of individual freedom and equality.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois declared that the problem of that century was “the problem of the color-line” (Du Bois 1989: 13). Still nowadays scholars believe that America as a nation has failed to solve the problem of the color-line within the country, due to the difficulty of addressing such a complex and delicate issue.

‘Race’ is not a safe or straightforward subject to grapple with. Even though everyone thinks they ‘know’ what a ‘race’ is, no one can quite define it². So any attempt to find a single, straightforward definition of ‘race’ is very complex. As a matter of fact since ‘race’ is a contentious and volatile subject, even those who consider themselves specialists in the field face great difficulties when they try to find a reasonable definition. Moreover

² Today ‘race’ seems to be both everywhere and nowhere as it seems to shape so much of our lives. In popular language ‘race’ is usually synonymous with ‘color’ and almost everybody is capable of distinguishing the three main racial groups keeping in mind the physical characteristics of each one: Africans (or Afro-Caribbeans), Asians and Europeans (or whites).

different social groups and different historical periods have understood 'race' in completely different ways.

In *The Meaning of Race*, Kenan Malik asserts the idea that 'race' emerged as a result of the scientific and technological transformations that occurred in the 19th century. Parallel to scientific progress, growing anxieties developed about the pace and nature of social change. The working class emerged as a new force in a society where the notion of 'race' expressed not only the idea of superiority brought about by the material advance, but also the sense of pessimism given by an inescapable regression. In other words, the social gradations within European society, namely the racialisation of social and class differences, led to the development of the modern discourse of race.

Gradually the racial categories which developed in relation to the differences within European societies were subsequently transposed to the non-European world, establishing Europe's sense of superiority over the rest. In fact there is a strong belief among specialists from various academic fields that colonialism and European conquest contributed to the Western elite's sense of superiority over colonised peoples. Hence from Malik's point of view 'race' is "an expression of the way that a particular society views humanity, and in particular views the relationship between humanity, nature and society." (1996: 5). So to grasp the meaning of 'race', one needs to investigate how the understanding of that relationship is socially and historically constructed³. Therefore it is inequality that gives rise to 'race' and not 'race' that gives rise to inequality.

As the idea of 'race' is a problematic concept in various academic fields, scholars, especially anthropologists, have been studying it for over two hundred years now. Today scholars in many fields argue that 'race', as it is understood in the U. S. A., was a social mechanism invented during the 18th century to refer to those populations brought together in colonial America: the English and other European settlers, the conquered Indian peoples and those peoples of Africa brought in to provide slave labour. The differences among Africans and Indians were magnified and a rigid hierarchy of socially exclusive categories was established. So the physical traits of African-Americans and Indians became markers or symbols of their status differences.

³ The distinction one makes between races is not naturally given, but socially defined. The creation of a race is the product of social need, according to the particular needs of society at the time, rather than biological fact.

As U.S. society was being constructed then, leaders among European-Americans were responsible for the associations of cultural and behavioural characteristics to 'race'. In this way numerous arbitrary and fictitious beliefs about the different peoples were institutionalized and embedded in American thought: superior traits were linked with Europeans and the negative and inferior ones with Blacks and Indians. After all, it had been the whites' natural superiority in the "struggle for life" (Appiah 1996: 65) that had led the whites (Western elites) to the colonies. Whites had the right to be on top of the racial hierarchy for they got there on merit⁴.

In *Color Conscious – The Political Morality of Race*, K. Anthony Appiah advances the notion that Thomas Jefferson⁵ was an important figure in the history of the American debates on racial politics. Jefferson contributed to shape the American Republic with his representative reflections on 'race'. For him 'race' "is a concept that is invoked to explain cultural and social phenomena." (idem: 43). In the case of late 18th century American society he referred frequently to the political impossibility of a citizenship shared between white and black races. Despite assuming that at the time emancipation was inevitable and that it was the right moment for it to be implemented, Jefferson believed that from the moment the Blacks got their emancipation, they would have to go elsewhere. Black and White could never live together in equality and harmony due to "the real distinctions which nature has made." (idem: 48).

In Thomas Jefferson's view the dark skin color and the nature of Negro hair are important physical characteristics because they helped to emphasise the 'superior beauty' of the whites. He pointed out other major differences which led to aesthetic consequences, namely: blacks have less hair on their face and bodies, "they secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odour." (Jefferson, Thomas cited in Appiah, K. Anthony 1996: 44).

Apart from these physical differences, Jefferson also focused on some moral characteristics of the Negro, the most obvious ones being: bravery, lustfulness, crudeness

⁴ On 24th November 1859 Charles Darwin published his work whose full title reads: *The Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. For Darwin race was a natural taxonomy of Homo sapiens, a biological division or subspecies. Furthermore he advanced the idea that the concept of evolution was associated to natural selection. At the top of the social Darwinist evolutionary ladder were 'Caucasians' (whites) and at the bottom were the 'Mongoloids' and 'Negroids'.

⁵ Thomas Jefferson (13th April 1743 – 4th July 1826) was the third President of the U. S. A. His nickname was "Man of the People" due to his determination to abolish or halt the advance of slavery. Although he was an outspoken abolitionist, he too owned many slaves over his lifetime.

of feeling and shallowness. Besides all these considerations, Thomas Jefferson still pointed out the distinct “intellectual capacities – or rather incapacities of black people.” (Appiah 1996: 48). Thus, for him both cultural and social phenomena can be explained through race. But it is also grounded in the physical and psychological natures of the different races. Hence it is a biological concept.

In the 19th century those who studied race classified groups of people on the basis of different phenotypical characteristics determined by physical attributes. As a matter of fact differences among the ‘racial’ categories were projected to their greatest extreme: Africans, Indians and Europeans were separate species, with Africans being the least human. This idea had persisted from the 17th century when for white Europeans in general, “[e]mpirical observation provided «evidence» of racial difference through skin color and black skin was correlated with what was characterised as an incapacity for rational thought.” (Young 1996: 41). Hence skin color determined the fate of not just the early slaves, but of generations to come.

In 1895 Félix-Louis Regnault, who embraced craniology as the supremely objective method for understanding the body, advanced the idea that “the brain of the Negro is a wax upon which nothing is written.” (Rony 1996: 39). In an attempt to prove the black man’s ‘inferiority’ in scientific terms, various anthropologists carried out extensive research. At the time the conclusions that they came up with were all very similar. While Louis Faidherbe⁶ advanced the view that the Blacks’ brains had “relatively weak volume” (idem 225), Pierre Gratiolet and Carl Vogt “believed that black skulls were similar to those of microcephalic idiots; [...] thus blacks would always be mentally inferior to whites.” (idem 224). Moreover other physical traits were pointed out to create the myth that blacks were closer to apes than whites, namely dark skin, “monkey-like teeth, steatopygy or large buttocks, and «prehensile» feet.” (idem: 31).

Later all these “scientific” assumptions were proven to be false. In *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon Allport actually argues that the facial features of the Negro and the ape only seem similar at first glance. Indeed “the thin lips and plentiful body hair of the whites are much closer to the ape than the corresponding features of Negroes.” (1997: 112). Despite the inaccuracies and inconclusive arguments of 19th century scientific racism, skin pigmentation carried on being the universal justification for the enslavement of African

⁶ Louis Léon César Faidherbe (3rd June 1818 – 29th September 1889) was a French general and colonial administrator who was governor of Senegal.

and the colonisation of ‘savage people’.” (Malik 1996: 92). The whites were ‘civilised’ and superior’ so they had a certain status which non-whites would (and should) never have the possibility of achieving.

During the last one hundred and fifty years “the validity of racial theories” (Barkan 1996: 10) has been highly contested, and so has slavery been abolished, but still, racism and racist ideas have continued supporting both elitist and populist ideas of hierarchy in Western culture.

During the thirties and forties biological theories of race were gradually discredited, in part due to the horrendous consequences of the misuse of the concept of race by the Nazi forces. But the impact of Nazism⁷ did not destroy the underlying belief that humanity is divided into discrete groups. Rather the ideas of social difference and pluralism were transposed on to the concept of ‘ethnicity’. That is, “[p]luralism provided a language through which to understand social differences without having to refer to the discredited discourse of race.” (Malik 1996: 173).

Like race, ethnicity is, in fact, a slippery and difficult term to define due to the fairly promiscuous way in which this term is so frequently used. Kenan Malik characterizes ethnicity as being a “peculiarly postwar word [to which] the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives a recorded usage in 1953” (idem 174). Despite the fierce debates among sociologists and anthropologists about the meaning of ethnicity, there is a common agreement that ‘race’ is based on biological and physical differences while ‘ethnicity’ refers to differences based on cultural distinctions.

In his article “Ethnicity, Race, Class and Nation”, Thomas H. Erikson claims ‘ethnicity’ started being used in the U. S. A. around the Second World War “as a polite term referring to Jews, Italians, Irish and other people considered inferior to the dominant group of largely British descent.” (1996: 28). At the time, not all Whites were equal beneficiaries of the inheritance of the myth of white superiority. The wave of European immigrants who had gone to the U. S. A. in the 18th and 19th centuries had led to hierarchical subdivisions of Caucasians, the Anglo-Saxons being at the top of the ladder, followed by the Southern Europeans and then the Jews.

In the “Introduction” of their book *Ethnicity*, the editors John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith define ‘ethnicity’ as “a named human population with myths of

⁷ Nazism refers to the totalitarian ideology and practices adopted in Germany from 1933 to 1945.

common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members.” (1996: 6).

In *Theories of Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors highlights the idea that in Gordon Allport’s view “both the «physical» differences (often associated with ‘race’) and the «cultural» differences (of ‘ethnicity’) rest on «perception».” (1996: xxx). The demarcation between race and ethnicity can be complex due to the difficulty in establishing where race ends and ethnicity begins.

In the U. S. A. the enormously complex set of religious, cultural and historical backgrounds of African Americans are completely blurred by the obsession with the color of their skin. Their physical appearance ended up engulfing their whole heritage which derives from many different parts of Africa, “from a mosaic of societies, kingdoms and communities whose languages, cultures, and histories varied enormously.” (Cornell and Hartmann 1998: 104-105). Some of the ancestors of every black American can be traced to Africa, however any common culture that may have existed between the descendants of African slaves and their African forebears has already been destroyed both by the efforts of slave owners and by the passage of time.

These people who were primarily Africans have become victims of prejudice, discrimination and racism in American society. It is precisely this apparently intense prejudice against being physically different which still prevails in the U. S. A, and which retards the absorption of the Negro into the general population. The coloured “Other” still presents great difficulty in respect of assimilation since the symbolism associated with blackness has always favoured the white race.

In *Fear of the Dark – ‘race’, gender and sexuality in the cinema*, Lola Young explains that “«Black» is a potent signifier of evil, of dirt, of that which is alien: whereas white signifies goodness, purity and that which is familiar, the norm.” (1996: 39). Furthermore in Western society there are inevitable associations of white with light and therefore safety, and black with dark, and therefore danger. The basic symbolic connotation of white in its most familiar form is the moral opposition of white=good and black=bad. Expressions like: “it’s just a little white lie”, “white magic”, “everything has its dark side”, “that’s a black mark” and “to blacken the character” are frequently used to refer

to either good or bad situations. Whiteness is more than a classification of physical appearance; it is an invented category based on history, culture, assumptions and attitudes.

Empirical observation actually facilitated a way of thinking which justified an economically-driven black enslavement. There is no real black person in the world, therefore, black people are socially categorized as black because of what 'black' means. As a matter of fact, black is virtually unthinkable except in opposition to white.

Black Americans have always been, and are still constantly reminded that they have a race which links each individual black to the fate of every other black. Hence blacks have turned to each other in the search for mutual protection and support. Black Americans are quite aware that their individual chance for achieving success in America is linked to the advancement of the race as a whole. But as Social Science research demonstrates, the term 'class' does not have the same meaning for all groups in American society. In *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics*, Michael Dawson argues that middle-class blacks differ in several important respects from their white counterparts. For instance, black middle-class households are poorer than white middle-class ones and black middle-class workers are more likely to be employed in the manufacturing or government sectors, unlike their white counterparts.

Throughout the history of the U. S. A. the terms used to refer to the peoples from Africa have changed significantly. However, as the whites' attitude has suffered slight alteration, the material reality of the African Americans has remained one of oppression and disadvantage. Although "[e]ach new term introduced seemed to break through the hatred and prejudice enshrined in the prevalent vocabulary, yet, each term itself was revealed to be oppressive, requiring a new term to supersede it." (Dyer 2002: 8). In this sense the different labels that have been used over times vary from "African" or "Negro" to "colored race" to "black" to "Afro-American" to "African-American".

Despite constituting a significant part of the American population, blacks are still an ethnic minority. Moreover the high level of segregation experienced by blacks today is unique, when compared with the experience of other large minority groups, such as Asians and Hispanics. White people go on setting goals by which they are bound to succeed and

“Others”, namely blacks, are bound to fail. Thus the representation through the white gaze has burdened black people in the U. S. A⁸.

Media of mass communication, for instance: novels, short stories, newspaper items, movies, stage, radio and television continually revive demeaning stereotypes and caricatures of Black Americans. When Walter Lippman coined the word ‘stereotype’ he did not intend it to have a pejorative connotation. However, nowadays the term is almost always a term of abuse. In *Race Matters*, Cornel West advances the view that “[a]fter centuries of racist degradation, exploitation, and oppression in America, being black means being minimally subject to white supremacist abuse and being part of a rich culture and community that has struggled against such abuse.” (1993: 25). In short, black identity is highly moulded by the dominant racist oppression, which it is subject to.

For Gordon Allport “[w]hether favourable or unfavourable, a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category.” (Allport 1997: 191). In other words, stereotypes are generalizations, or assumptions which people make about a person or a group of persons, based on an image, often wrong. Stereotypes are normally developed when someone is unable or unwilling to obtain all the information they would need to make fair judgements about people or situations. Society invents and perpetuates stereotypes, but these stereotypes frequently lead to unfair discrimination and sometimes even persecution when the stereotype is unfavourable. “They are created to serve as substitutes, standing in for what is real. They are there not to tell it like it is but to invite and encourage pretense.” (hooks 1997: 170).

From the very birth of Hollywood films the presence of black performers has commonly been associated with blackness and marginality. As a matter of fact, over time cinema has been presenting blacks through demeaning stereotypes which go on glorifying the white racial hierarchy of American society. In *White Screens Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*, James Snead assures us that “[i]n order for whites to have a certain authority over blacks, blacks always have to be the same.” (1994: 139). The viewer receives a strong message of black inferiority and this makes him/her increase his/her belief in white superiority.

⁸ What it means to be white in this contemporary information age implies Access to mainstream and popular culture which implies privilege and universality.

In this sense through the use of black stereotypes in films, the painful history of black subjugation has been completely denied to them and they are usually placed in the realm of demeaning (reassuring to whites) myth. That is, blacks are trapped in a reality which depicts their behaviour as being completely static, enduring and unchangeable. A major aim of American films, in particular, has been not only to feature images of blacks, be they more or less “negative”, but rather to emphasise the elevation and mythification of whites. Hence the most common stereotypes in American movies include “the stooge / jester, the buck / brute, the tragic mulatto, the body-servant / mammy / housemaid and the loyal sidekick / retainer.” (idem 142), as set against the cowboy, the war hero, the businessman, etc.

The segregating discourse of whiteness carries on being present in films, not only through the use of stereotypes, but also through story lines and their resolutions, which normally emphasise the superiority of whites. In most films of the 80s, for instance the action film *Die Hard* (1988), black characters act as supportive figures for the white hero. Although the relationship between the white hero and the black buddy is central to the development of the narrative, the black actor is a marginal figure. Only rarely have black performers been given the chance to take center stage. So the black sidekick appears in buddy action movies to marvel at the hero’s achievements and to support him through difficult situations. In these cases, he carries out a supportive and sometimes a fatherly role. According to Bogle in scenarios of “interracial male bonding, black men are a cross between toms and mummies: all-giving, all-knowing, all-sacrificing nurturers.” (2004: 276).

Even though recently there has been a slight shift as far as representations are concerned, racism against African Americans is still prevalent in the U.S.A. “Baldwin wrote that «people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them». There is then only the fantasy of escape, or the promise that what is lost will be found, rediscovered, returned.” (hooks 1997: 173) Newspaper heiress Sallie Bingham recalls in her autobiography *Passion and Prejudice* (1989): “Blacks, I realized, were simply invisible to most white people, except as a pair of hands offering a drink on a silver tray.” (Bingham, Sally cited in hooks, bell 1997: 168). Bell hooks asserts:

[r]educed to the machinery of bodily physical labor, black people learned to appear before whites as though they were zombies,

cultivating the habit of casting the gaze downward so as not to appear uppity. To look directly was an assertion of subjectivity, equality. Safety resided in the pretense of invisibility (1997: 168)

Few films made by white writers, producers and directors have ever portrayed a positive image of Black society; they have tended to have social and political agendas influencing a negative representation. In order to analyse modern films it is important to understand how the past has shaped the film industry. This I will go on to show in my next chapter.

Chapter Two

Representing Black Americans in cinema: Hollywood up to 1980

2.1. First African Americans' depictions

From 1619 until 1863 (Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on January 1st) black and white slave traders literally kidnapped millions of Black Africans from their homeland unwillingly and sold them at slave auctions in America. Most of those slaves were taken to the cotton fields where they toiled from sunrise to sunset. Slaveholders believed their slaves lived longer and produced more if they sang. So during slavery White Americans became aware of the comforting and amusing presence of the obedient happy-go-lucky Blacks, who had in their own way adopted a mask (chants...) which ended up being their survival tool.

In his article, "American Movies: The Black Presence in American Cinema", Jim Pines states that "[i]mages of black people have featured prominently throughout the history of American cinema. They go back to the earliest days of the filmic process itself, when Thomas A. Edison utilized black subjects in a number of his peep-show Kinetoscope movies" (1997: 497), for instance *The Pickaninnies doing a Dance* (1894), *Three Man Dance* (c.1894) and *Negro Dancers* (1895), among others.

In *Slow Fade to Black*, Thomas Cripps emphasizes that Thomas Alva Edison's Kinetoscope, which had been invented in 1888, was largely developed by his employee William Kennedy Laurie Dickson. In this way, "[i]n the spring of 1896 it was projected on the screen at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York. Gradually over the next 20 years flickering images replaced live vaudevillians in the hearts of audiences." (1997: 9). Despite being crude, these movies played an important role in the setting of the cultural tone of racial representation in the newly emerging mass entertainment medium motion pictures.

The first so-called comedy shorts which helped to establish the cinematic image of blacks as figures of relief were Edison's *Chicken Thieves* (1897), *Watermelon Contest* (1899) and *The Pickaninnies* (1904). These early racial motifs were usually set in a socially segregated situation, as the blackface characters' aim was to amuse white

audiences by playing out a great range of exaggerated comic set pieces. After the introduction of the pickaninny in 1904, the coon made its way onto the screen in both *Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1905). In *Toms, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks*, Donald Bogle claims “[t]he pickaninny was the first of the coon types to make its screen debut.” (2004: 7). The importance of these films was precisely to show the beginnings of cinematic portraits of black American and also to prove that at the very beginning of the movie industry Afro-Americans were present, no matter how imperfectly represented.

For many critics the coon caricature is one of the most insulting of all anti-black caricatures. The name is an abbreviation that comes from raccoon, which is dehumanizing. However some writers advanced the idea that the coon caricature was born during American Slavery because at that time almost all the Blacks, especially the men, were seen as being lazy, shiftless and virtually useless. After slavery the coon caricature was increasingly applied to younger Blacks, especially those who were urban, flamboyant and contemptuous of Whites.

The coon caricature was not only depicted in films but it was also present in other art forms. During the greatest part of the 19th century one of the most popular form of music in the U.S.A. was black minstrelsy. The majority of the performers were white men who pretended to be African-American, presenting stereotypical images of African-Americans as unintelligent, ugly and often violent. At the time many songs were actually published and sold. The excerpt that follows is the chorus of a song written by Ernest Hogan⁹ in 1896 and it reads as follows:

All coons look alike to me
I've got another beau, you see
And he's just as good to me as you, nig!
Ever tried to be
He spends his money free,
I know we can't agree
So I don't like you no how
.....

A close examination of these lyrics transmits a number of clues about the stereotypes relevant in minstrelsy and about the politics of the era in general.

⁹ Ernest Hogan, born Ernest Reuben Crowders, 1865 – 1909, was the first African American entertainer to produce and star in a Broadway Show – *The Oyster Man* in 1907. Besides this he also helped to create the musical genre of ragtime.

Once commercial cinema was started, Afro-Americans appeared on the screen, be it through luck or accident, in a more favorable way than they had done before, both in the theatre and in literature. When the commercial film industry was becoming a rising enterprise in the first ten years of the 20th century, both Sergei Eisenstein and Charles Chaplin speculated that “the expansion and universalization of the new medium would forever change and advance the way that human beings would perceive, understand, and communicate with one another”. (Guerrero 1993: 2).

However things worked out differently as “[films] became a hindrance rather than an aid to racial understanding, and in many cases [they] served as a tool of the prevailing segregation and white supremacist dogma.” (Snead 1994: 107-108).

In 1903 ‘[t]he mechanic-turned-movie-director’ (Bogle 2004: 3) Edwin Stanton Porter created the movie stereotype of the Uncle Tom, when he brought Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to the screen in a version that ran for about twelve minutes. Thus Uncle Tom became American movies’ first black character who “was portrayed by a nameless, slightly overweight white actor made up in blackface.” (idem). From then onwards, it was a common practice to use whites in black roles as characters to entertain audiences. In this sense “Porter’s Tom was the first in a long line of socially acceptable Good Negro characters” (idem: 4).

As I said, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was based on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s¹⁰ classic anti-slavery novel and by 1928 there were already at least seventeen film versions. Nevertheless in 1914 the fourth version, directed by William Robert Daly, was an innovation as far as the Tom tradition was concerned because in the title role was the Negro stage actor Samuel Lucas¹¹.

In 1905 most African Americans portrayed in Hollywood films were white actors in blackface. In his book *Hollywood*, writer Gary Null portrayed black males as slow-talking, dim-witted imbeciles and irresponsible, lazy bucks. Furthermore movie trade unions controlled closely the Afro-Americans who aspired to work behind the lens as writers, directors, cinematographers, editors, set designers, carpenters, plumbers, painters, make-up

¹⁰ Harriet Beecher Stowe’s work first appeared on 2nd June 1851 in *The Natural Era Weekly Magazine*. Only then did the author decide to write a complete version which was ready in March 1852. In the very first week 5,000 copies were sold. But the first name of the book was *Life Among the Lowly* and it was based upon the life of a narrative of a runaway slave called Josiah Henson. This book influenced the Anti-Slavery Movements.

¹¹ Samuel Lucas – 1840 - 1916. Before he could finish the film, he died of pneumonia.

and hair-stylists. Consequently blackface actors continued depicting blackness in various states of silliness, deprivation and ignorance.

Despite the deep-set prejudice against all ‘others’ there was no minority that was so fiercely typed as the black man. Whites defended the idea that Blacks were genetically, therefore permanently, inferior to Whites. For instance in 1908 Jack Johnson became the first black heavyweight champion of the world, as he knocked out Tommy Burns. White Americans’ ‘racial pride’ was so disturbed that the films were banned for fear of riots. “Thereafter, black boxers in films were invariably defeated by their white opponents” (Bogle 2004: 17). Johnson was also hounded out of the country, and the marriage laws were reviewed, when he had the temerity to marry a white woman.

When reflecting on the poisoned, racist condition of the popular imagination at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th Centuries, the historian Mary Berry concluded that “with the possible exception of the Chinese, no other ethnic group was more frequently lampooned than blacks were between 1895 and 1900” (1982: 344-345).

In the first decade of the 20th century great changes shook both black and white society, namely the founding of the Urban League, which brought along with it the recognition of new problems and consequently demanded new solutions related to jobs, discrimination, shabby housing, residential discrimination. However movie makers continued to derive racial themes from dated originals, because the sources of movies were nostalgic, and blacks were struggling among themselves for hegemony, so they expressed no clear voice.

The main stereotypes depicted were: Toms, Coons; Mulattoes and Mammies. Bogle defines Toms as being good Negro characters, just like Edwin Porter’s Tom, who submissively do everything expected of them, never turn on white people, no matter what may happen, and often end up as saintly models. Hence they are sometimes chased, enslaved and even insulted. No wonder, much later on, more ambitious black society began to regard this term as being pejorative.

The coons normally played the role of comic relief as they were complete buffoons. There are two types of coons though: the pickaninny (the black child whose eyes pop out and who plays about). The other type is Uncle Remus, who is as saintly as the Tom type, but he tends to be quaint, naïve and comic in his philosophical assertions. As Bogle notes “[t]he pure coons emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman

creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language.” (2004: 8).

The mulattoes are usually tragic fair-skinned women who live as white persons, but have the secret of black blood in their veins. It is ironic that such characters were played by white actresses, so that there would be no problems for the white audiences in identifying with the actresses’ traumas. The mammy was absurd in a way similar to the coon, but she was fiercely independent in her domestic domain. She was usually big and fat.

Finally the last mythic type was introduced in *The Birth of a Nation*¹² (1915), the brutal black buck. This savage and violent character was over-sexed and eager to get more than his hands on white women. Many critics believe that before 1915, the Negro had been stereotyped as a clown or an Uncle Tom, but now he was disfigured as a “beast” to be feared.

Therefore Bogle asserts that the early silent period of motion pictures continues to be notable, not for the existence of any great black performances, for there weren’t any, but because of the prevalence of the five basic types. It was in that period that the dominant black characters for the next half century were first introduced. From the moment that the basic mythic types were introduced, other changes occurred. Specific black themes, for instance, like that of the Old South, seemed to become more common.

The Birth of a Nation, also known as *The Clansman*, was a silent movie directed by David Llewelyn Wark, more commonly known as D. W. Griffith.¹³ It was filmed in Chicago and was released in 1915.

In his book, *Framing Blackness* Ed Guerrero assures us that:

it remains the most controversial film ever made in America [...] it reflects the combined work and ideas of three white male southerners living in the North at the end of the nineteenth century. The film emerged out of Griffith’s collaboration with Thomas Dixon¹⁴, whose racist, anti black novels *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905) inform the film’s plot. (1993: 11)

¹² The film was rehearsed for six months, filmed in nine, later edited in three months, and finally released as a record breaking hundred thousand dollar spectacle. It had 12 reels and lasted for almost four hours

¹³ D. W. Griffith – 22nd January 1875 – 23rd July 1948.

¹⁴ 11th January 1864 – 3rd April 1946 – American Baptist Minister.

Thomas Dixon's staging of *The Clansman*, nine years earlier had led to widespread black protest. During its southern run the play had received 'good notices and enthusiastic audiences'. However "[a] prominent Minister labeled it a 'disgrace' and pleaded 'for God's sake, the negro's sake and our sake, give the negro a rest from abuse'". (Cripps 1993: 44). Both Dixon and Griffith decided to get some support among prominent Americans for the film and consequently it was the first film to screen in the White House. On 18th February 1915 President Woodrow Wilson¹⁵ was overwhelmed by the power and message of the film. Upon viewing the film the only words he was able to say were: "It's like writing history with lightning!" (Snead 1994: 41). In this way, Woodrow Wilson, a southerner himself, proclaimed the film not only historically accurate, but also a powerfully romanticized image of the South.

According to the historian Joel Williamson, currently a Professor in the Humanities, at the University of North Carolina, from 1880 to 1920 there were three 'mentalities' in southern thinking about people of colour: the 'liberal' who believed in the black's possibilities; the 'Conservative' (perhaps the oldest) who looked at the blacks as being inferior, but was willing to permit them in their 'place' and finally the 'radical conservative' who thought 'the new Negro' was regressing into savagery. Williamson places Dixon into this last category, due to the fact that the paranoia of this mentality centred on interracial sex (through rape or marriage) which brought the fear of possibly 'perverted' offspring.

The film is described by many critics, including Donald Bogle as "the most slanderous anti-Negro movie ever released" (2004: 10). *The Birth of a Nation* is filled with African-American caricatures and it has a racist narrative, transmitting in this way the message that "things were in order only when the whites were in control and when the American Negro was kept in his place." (idem).

Many film scholars lay stress on certain events that surrounded the distribution of *The Birth of a Nation*. Thomas Cripps affirms that the film appeared precisely when the conditions for the Afro-American were deteriorating. Despite some progress in specific areas of social action occurring, Woodrow Wilson's presidency was seen by Afro-Americans as a resurgence of "Southern Ideals": black people were denied the ballot box;

¹⁵ 28th December 1856 – 3rd February 1924 (28th President of the U.S.A). President Woodrow Wilson, history professor and the white President of Princeton university, discouraged blacks from even applying for admission preferring to keep the peace among white students than have black students admitted.

Jim Crow Laws were expanding and between 1898 and 1908, race riots occurred in Wilmington (North Carolina), New York City, New Orleans and Illinois. Moreover World War I (1914-1918) was in full force and the First Migration (1910-1930) brought to the big cities a surge of population from the rural South. Both black and whites went looking for jobs and housing, in part related with rising Northern industrialization, when war-related industries had to increase their production and consequently needed more people to work there.

Within the social, economic and political context that was emerging, nothing could remain the same. Therefore black racial consciousness sharpened too. “No longer would blacks be silent while white men in black masks paraded across movie screens.” (Cripps 1997: 42). Even before Griffith completed *The Birth of a Nation*, black leaders such as William Edward Burghardt Du Bois began to stand out. After 1903 he began by published attack on Washington’s leaders. Two years later Du. Bois formed an organization called The Niagara Movement, whose main purpose was to offer a militant alternative to Washington. The group consisted of some of the intellectual elite of the African-American Community and they promoted a campaign called “Black is Beautiful”. In 1909 the members of the Niagara Movement and Northern white Liberals formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which already had about six thousand members in various cities by 1914. On the West Coast Afro-Americans began to protest against *The Birth of a Nation*, as they were well aware the film was based on Dixon’s racist play – *The Clansman*.

In spite of all the effort against it, the picket lines trying to persuade audiences not to attend, the film’s producer planned a huge opening in New York at the Liberty Theatre near Time Square on 3rd March. *The Birth of a Nation* – the first American long feature film - was screened and it quickly became the most successful film ever shown in New York during the silent film era¹⁶.

The film’s melodramatic plot revolves around the fates of two families, one from the North and the other from the South before and after the Civil War. It depicts southern blacks as lascivious, their northern white allies as cunning, unscrupulous, and arrogant, and the film’s southern whites as suffering repeated political and sexual indignities at the hands of white northerners and black southerners before literally being rescued by the gallant,

¹⁶ *The Birth of a Nation* became the most widely acclaimed and financially successful film of the entire silent era. This film alone grossed more than \$13 million, which was more than any other film before 1934.

hooded riders of the Ku Klux Klan. Consequently a wave of “Negrophobia” towards black people and their culture arose, as these portrayals were damaging not only to the actors, who were forced to endure these types, but also to black audience members.

One of the film’s major concepts is that of racial impurity, which is evident in the characterization of black, and especially mixed race people. In the essay “Into the light: the whiteness of the South in *The Birth of a Nation*, Richard Dyer advances the view that:

The film uses three means of performer representation for African-Americans: actual black performers for crowd scenes and bit parts, white performers with whitened faces (notably Gus) and whites with not only blacked-up faces but also the white lips, ringed eyes and fuzzy wigs of the minstrel show.” (2002: 161).

The film is divided into two parts. The first half of the film alternates geographically unequally between the North and the South. “The opening shot reveals the Negroes, not black faced actors, brought in the bondage which «planted the seed of disunion».” (Cripps 1977: 46). Meanwhile “...the Civil War breaks out, the North becomes victorious and the old order cracks” (Bogle 1997: 19). The second part deals with the post Civil War Reconstruction. Griffith “focused on a good, decent ‘little’ family, the Camerons.” (idem: 10). “The Cameron’s mammy, a good black, [...] is very darkly made-up but without minstrel elements [...] she contrasts to the very minstrelsy, comic ‘uppity’ Stoneman servant.” (Dyer 2002: 161). Bogle himself depicts the mammy as a “faithful” soul (2004: 13).

A troop of black soldiers terrorizes the Cameron family in Piedmont and the entire South undergoes “ruin, devastation, rapine and pillage.” (Bogle 1997: 19). “All blacks in this scene are bad by the film’s lights...” (Dyer 1977: 161). Nevertheless there is “...a mammy and an uncle tom, who remain with the Cameron family throughout and staunchly defend them from the rebels.” (Bogle 1993: 13). For Bogle, the Black Union Soldiers were depicted as “black brutes” for they “...shove[d] and assault[ed] white men of the town”. (idem).

Griffith’s blacks were not accepted in 1915 and consequently *The Birth of a Nation* with its black-faced ‘baddies’ aroused a rash of hostilities. Besides demonstrations, race riots broke out in many cities and many newspaper editorials and speeches censured the film and it was actually banned in some places. To a certain extent Griffith was aware that his film was going to be an important mark in the history of cinema due to its innovative

techniques. In an interview with Lillian Gish, in the winter of 1914, he stated the following:

Do you know that we are playing to the world? What we film tomorrow will strike the hearts of the world. And they will know what we are saying. We've gone beyond Babel, beyond words. We found an universal language – a power that can make men brothers and end wars forever. Remember that, remember that when you go before the camera.

David Wark Griffith, 1941

Griffith himself showed shock at the Negro resentment of his work that “he said [it] is like saying I am against children, as they were our children, whom we loved and cared for all our lives.” (Gish 1959: 108-109). Puzzled, he looked at his black maid, who, troubled and tense with emotion, blurted out, “It hurt me, Mr. David, to see what you did to my people” (idem).

2.2. Race Movies

The Great Migration between 1910 and 1920 was an important factor that influenced the development of African American cinema. During that decade about two million African Americans moved from the South to Northern cities, for instance, Chicago, New York, Cleveland and Detroit, escaping feudal tenant farming, lack of useful education, unemployment and Jim Crow laws. Despite their choices being limited, as they carried on being subject to racism, there they looked for access to greater education, factory jobs, positions of skilled labour and even professional employment. Consequently all these opportunities led to the subsequent growth of a black middle-class.

In a certain sense *The Birth of a Nation* accelerated the formation of the Independent Afro-American Filmmakers. Northern-educated blacks, enraged by the message and influence of the film, wanted to refute *Birth* in its own medium, for they believed that up to that point Hollywood hadn't offered humane depictions of African American life and culture. As a matter of fact, Rogin argues, “American film was born from white depictions of blacks” (1992: 419). Thus Afro-American filmmakers took up their cause by counter-attacking Griffith's masterwork producing their own movies known as “Race Movies”. It is estimated that more than five hundred race movies were produced between 1910 and 1948 though not all race movies were produced by blacks because “[t]he myth of the melting pot excluded Afro-Americans.” (Cripps 1993: 169).

Race Movies were made with an all-Black cast featured black subject matter and were marketed toward a Black audience. James Snead asserted that “[t]he first generation of black independent Filmmakers was active, albeit with uneven success from about 1910 until the late 1930s” (1994: 110). In fact in 1910 pioneer William (Bill) Foster, who had a background in theater and vaudeville, founded the first black film production company – the William D. Foster Photoplay Company in Chicago. But his work has been lost and now it is only known that he “scrambled together enough money to produce his first short black-cast film *The Railroad Porter* around 1912, followed by *The Fall Guy* and *The Barber*.” (Bogle 2004: 102).

Nevertheless for many scholars the first movie company controlled by black filmmakers was actually The Lincoln Motion Picture Company, which was a creation of the black actor Noble Mark Johnson and his brother George Johnson. The company was founded in Omaha, Nebraska in 1915 and incorporated in Los Angeles, California in 1916. When the Johnson brothers opened their business their main aim was to produce movies which pictured “the Negro as he [was] in his every day life, a human being with human inclination, and one of talent and intellect.” (Cripps 1993: 76).

In 1916 they completed and distributed *The Realization of the Negro’s Ambition*. This film is centered on James Burton (played by Noble Johnson), a civil engineer who goes away from his rural surroundings looking to make his fortune in the oil industry of California. As this film was a success, they continued producing other films, namely *Trooper of Troop K* (1918), *A Man’s Duty* (1919), their first feature film, and *By Right of Birth* (1921). The latter was another of the company’s “hope for success” movies and it depicted the portrayal of black life, but this time featuring successful middle-class African Americans. But without a wider audience, as their films were mostly booked in special locations at churches and schools and a few “colored only” theaters in America. The Lincoln Company was doomed to failure and *By Right of Birth* actually proved to be the company’s swan song.

For some historians the first race movie that caught black national attention was *The Birth of a Race*¹⁷ (1918) – “a proposed antidote to *The Birth of a Nation*” (idem: 6). After a succession of producers the film was undertaken and produced by Emmet Jay Scott who finally managed to turn out the film “[a]fter three years spent securing patchy and

¹⁷ *The Birth of a Race* was filmed in Chicago and it took about two years to make. Though only ten minutes of the original footage remains today, it was about three hours in length.

often unreliable funding both by black and white sponsors” (Snead 1994: 110). The film grew out of a wish, shared by its producer, who was at the time personal secretary to Black Rights Leader – Booker Taliaferro Washington of the Tuskegee Institute. Emmet Jay Scott envisioned a film that would be a cry for tolerance and understanding, a film that would show there was no difference between blacks and whites and the suffering of one was the suffering of the other.

Even though *The Birth of a Race* did not start or empower black cinema, it marked the point at which black cinema was recognized as an extension of the black community. Right from the beginning its goal was by no means to fight the Hollywood machine, but rather to serve the black community just like Hollywood served the white. According to James Snead this movie was “[a]rtistically one of the least successful, but one of the most powerful in terms of its political aspirations.” (idem).

The narrative was intended to be a comprehensive history of the Negro’s past, present and future from Africa to America and beyond. But it ended up being something like a pacifist commentary on the causes of World War I. Ed Guerrero agrees that *The Birth of a Race* was one of the most notable efforts of the black independent film projects that depicted “through «positive images» the uplift and progress of the race.” However he is aware that it was “doomed to commercial failure because of its poor technical and narrative qualities as well as the economic problems of confronting an established, white-dominated, and white-monopolized film industry.” (Guerrero 1993: 14-15). “Yet it served as an impetus for others” according to Bogle (2004: 103).

Oscar Devereaux Micheaux, a “fiendishly aggressive young entrepreneur” (Bogle 2004: 109), is considered to have been the father of the Afro-American cinema and the most prolific African-American film-maker of the silent era. As far as Donald Bogle is concerned, Micheaux was “[t]he one filmmaker who survived the flu epidemic, the competition from the Hollywood studios, and even the financial pinch of the Depression” (idem). Furthermore James Snead wrote that “Oscar Micheaux was the dominant personality of [the Black Independent Films period] and typified better than anyone of his generation the all-around «black independent filmmaker», writing, financing, producing, directing, and distributing his own films” (Snead 1994: 112). In the article “Identity and Betrayal – The Symbol of the Unconquered and Oscar Micheaux’s «Biographical Legend»” Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence refer to Oscar Micheaux as being the son of

former slaves who belonged to “a generation of African American migrants who left the land in search of the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire” (1996: 59).

In 1919 Micheaux produced *The Homesteader*, which was based on one of his first self-published, semi-autobiographical novels. His main goal was to show that he was an honest hardworking Negro who was determined to succeed. As a matter of fact, he wanted to prove the general belief that when “the Negro” had to face the hardships of the homesteader, he wouldn’t change it for the “ease and comfort” of the city. Thus many of his characters “represented sociological and moral forces rather than psychologically individuated people, and function as models to prove what can be accomplished through hard work and industry.” (idem: 66).

The film *Within Our Gates* was based on the famous Leo Frank lynching case¹⁸ and it opened in January 1920. In this film Micheaux also attacked the racism depicted in *The Birth of a Nation*. *Within Our Gates* was lost for almost seventy years and in 1990 a print was discovered in Spain with the title – *La Negra (The Black Woman)*. Micheaux’s film included a sequence which depicted the hanging of two innocent African-Americans, man and wife. As the film was released a year after the Red Summer of 1919¹⁹ there was active resistance to it for fear of race riots. From the very beginning of the film, through the opening title Micheaux makes it clear that the film will deal with a topic completely avoided by contemporary African American and white filmmakers – lynching. In this way Micheaux demonstrates that with changing post-war conditions, even the North was no longer “safe”.

It was *Body and Soul* (1924) that represented Micheaux’s highest level of achievement. This film is one of the few remaining examples of his silent work. Paul Robeson made his debut in *Body and Soul*, in which he played both the role of the hero and the villain with no make up change.²⁰

¹⁸ Leo Max Frank (17th April 1884 – 17th August 1915) was an American man who became the only known Jew in history to be lynched on American soil. He was the manager of a pencil-factory in Atlanta and was convicted in the rape and murder of thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan (a pencil-factory worker).

¹⁹ The Red Summer of 1919 was coined by the author James Weldon Johnson. It is used to describe the bloody race riots that took place during the Summer and Autumn of 1919. These race riots erupted in both the North and South of the U.S.A.

²⁰ A print of this film was screened at a special ceremony in Hollywood in 1986. It was then that Micheaux was posthumously given a Life Achievement Award by the Directors Guild of America (the only African American who received such honor).

Audiences can only appreciate Micheaux's films if they understand that his goal was to move as far away from Hollywood's jesters as possible. His race movies cannot be viewed as commercial entertainment. To appreciate them the audience must take Afro-American History and the prevailing ideology into context. However, ironically his last film *The Betrayal* (1948) opened at a white theater in New York. This film was drawn from Micheaux's novel – *The Wind from Nowhere*. Historian Thomas Cripps believes this film and its release “despite its self-proclaimed «greatness» signaled the end of the race movie era.” (1993: 147)

The Colored Players Film Corporation²¹ was a significant example of a “black-white joint venture which managed a high level of production integrity in its many films, including *A Prince of his Race* (1926), the temperance piece *Ten Nights in a Barroom* (1926) and perhaps most notably, *Scar of Shame*²² (Snead 1994: 111). As far as Thomas Cripps is concerned, the latter was “[t]he finest hour of the Colored Players” (Cripps 1997: 196). Moreover in his article “«Race Movies» as Voices of the Black Bourgeoisie: The Scar of Shame” Thomas Cripps highlights:

[b]ecause these movies were tailor-made for a specific audience, they often precisely reflected an authentic black morality, social ethic, and point of view. *The Scar of Shame* [...] provides one of the best examples of a movie intended to convey black middle-class social values to a black urban audience. (1997: 47).

From Bogle's point of view *Scar of Shame* “remains an effective piece of work” (2004: 107), as a matter of fact, it “was possibly the finest product of the entire independent movement” (idem). In the article where he analyses the movie, Cripps emphasizes the idea that “*The Scar of Shame* affirmed and dramatized this new Negro ideal – the grasping after «the finer things, the higher hopes, and higher aims»” (1997: 55). Snead shared the same opinion when he wrote “*Scar of Shame* certainly ranks among the most technically adept and thematically compelling films of the early black independent period.” (1994: 111). Furthermore in 1927 “[t]he Amsterdam News singled it out as «a new standard of excellence»”. (Cripps 1997: 196).

²¹ The Colored Players Film Corporation was a white-owned Philadelphia Studio. In the Spring of 1926 it moved from Washington to Philadelphia, where it released a couple of movies in the tradition of black cinema.

²² *Scar of Shame* is one of the four survivors of the silent era.

The film is about the story of an ill-matched marriage between a black concert pianist and a poor lower-class black girl. The young man is secretly ashamed of his wife therefore he keeps her hidden from his mother – a “socially prominent middle-class” (Bogle 2004: 107) woman. *The Scar of Shame* emphasizes the divisions that exist among black Americans. Almost all the characters are fair-skinned but as the girl’s father is very dark, she is “clearly a victim of her «dark» biological background” (idem). Thus throughout the film visual images symbolize the idea that success symbols are good and poverty symbols are bad.

In her article “*The Scar of Shame: Skin Color and Caste in Black Melodrama*”, Jane Gaines admits that the film “was directed and photographed by white professionals and improvised by black actors from a story written by the white producer, David Starkman.” (1997: 66). As far as the star, Lucia Lynn Moses, was concerned blacks only contributed with their presence: “I never saw a piece of paper. I did everything they said. And that’s all... I never took any directions from anybody colored...It was always the two white fellahs.” (Cripps 1997: 198).

In the thirties and forties the first generation of black independent filmmakers almost disappeared, not only due to purely technical difficulties, but also hastened by the Great Depression. Even though there was a significant number of all-black “race films” produced during this period, “there were only a few remarkable examples of independent black filmmaking.” (Snead 1994: 113-114).

The most remarkable directors of the second phase of the underground movement were George Randol and Spencer Williams. The former, who was loosely associated with Million Dollar Pictures, produced and directed an independent all-black gangster film called *Dark Manhattan* (1937) besides a couple of films that focused on themes of romance, society, comedy and crime. So Randol’s films, namely: *Gangsters on the Loose* (1938), *Reform School* (1939) and *While Thousands Cheer* (1940), avoided controversial issues just like their Hollywood counterparts. The latter, Spencer Williams, was another prominent black figure of this era because he often served as star, producer and director. His Amegro Films produced *The Blood of Jesus* (1944), *Go Down Death* (1944) and *Juke Joint* (1947). Apart from these films, only a handful of other films, including those of Oscar Micheaux – who was forced to seek out white support (or «angels») – survived the Great Depression and the technological innovations (and their high costs) of the sound era.

2.3. Entertainers or servants

The talking-motion-picture era was launched on 6th October 1927 with the release of *The Jazz Singer* by Warner Brothers and directed by Alan Crosland. To a certain extent, the film's release heralded the commercial ascendance of the "talkies" and the decline of the silent film era. This was the first film in which the "blackface fixation" (Bogle 2004: 27) was best epitomized.

Cripps claims that "by the end of the silent era, momentum had shifted to Hollywood because the blacks were either trapped in the dying art of silent drama or they were too poor to raise funds for sound film." (1997: 199). In this way the talkie era proved to be a major breakthrough. As, according to the American Myth, no one was more rhythmic or musical than Negroes, both Fox Pictures and MGM set to work and the end results were two musicals with all black casts: *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) and *Hallelujah* (1929). Each film, in its way, ended up being an "artful humane depiction of black Southern life and its spoilage by urbanization." (idem: 236). Despite both films being praised not only by Black, but also by White critics for their attempts at making the story center around African American characters, they also maintained the stereotype that Black Americans are born with rhythm and ability to entertain. So the hope that African Americans could get more than their feet in the doors of Hollywood cinema with their artistic talents only resulted in more stereotypes.

As Hollywood was not interested in making Positive Image Movies about African Americans, the principal roles available to black actors were maids, walk-ons, butlers, servants or comics. Nevertheless blackface was still in vogue and it could sell movie tickets. So many white actors carried on appearing in blackface, for example, Jimmie Durante in *The Phantom* (1932), Fred Astaire in *Swingtime* (1933), Eddie Cantor in *Roman Scandals* (1933), Judy Garland in *Everybody Sing* (1938) and Mickey Rooney in *Babes in Arms* (1939).

In the thirties African American actors ended up getting a role in Hollywood movies as servants. The most successful ones were: Stepin Fetchit²³ in *Carolina* (1934) and *Judge Priest* (1934); Louise Beavers, the exceedingly faithful Mammy in *Imitation of Life* (1934)

²³ Stepin Fetchit was the first black to become a millionaire but he was forced to declare bankruptcy in 1947. Between 1925 and 1976 he appeared in fifty-four films and he has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in the category "motion pictures". He died from pneumonia at the age of eighty-three.

and *No Time for Comedy* (1940) and Hattie McDaniel²⁴, the black maid and obedient servant, in *Anniversary Trouble* (1935), *Judge Priest* (1934) and *Gone with the Wind*²⁵ (1939). The latter has been criticized for its depiction of slaves. Many critics feel the movie glamorizes many stereotypes, including the happy, fat slave and the simpleton.

Hattie McDaniel plays Mammy, a subservient role, but this time she is a black lead character depicted as human and sympathetic. In that white love story, Mammy is in reality the adviser, the stable force playing in this way an essential part. Thus Bogle emphasizes that “McDaniel’s Mammy becomes an all-seeing, all-hearing, all-knowing commentator and observer.” (2004: 88). Mammy is shown to be more ambiguous than the other black characters, as she is wise, but uneducated, and bossy, yet servile. However Butterfly McQueen, whose performance was marked by fragility, hysteria and absurdity, played a completely different role from Hattie. Butterfly McQueen “seemed to ask for protection and was a unique combination of the comic and the pathetic” (idem: 90).

Finally as far as the male slaves were concerned, the audiences were expected to laugh at them. Indeed one of the most frivolous moments in the film is a scene when a comically foolish slave is chasing a rooster with a cleaver. Hence the slaves in the film only serve to highlight the characters’ ignorance and sense of inferiority and gratitude.

Paul Robeson was a black actor who stood apart from the rest of the servant figures of the time. Whenever Robeson went into a motion picture, he did it with the hope that “it would elevate the state of his people.” (idem: 95). His main goal, not only in the American but also in the British film industry, was precisely to destroy the historical Southern Negro stereotype character that was attributed to him. The film in which he starred that brought the greatest contribution to black film and which most disturbed American white moviegoers was *The Emperor Jones* (1933). In this highly censored film, Brutus Jones (Paul Robeson) refuses to obey or be polite to anyone, rather he is “an arrogant, strong-willed braggart who rises from Pullman porter to autocrat.” (idem: 98). Not only Paul Robeson’s size and strength, but also his voice made him “a symbol of black confidence and self-fulfillment” (idem).

²⁴ Hattie McDaniel (10th June 1895 – 26th October 1952) was an American actress and the first black performer to win an Academy Award for her role of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*.

²⁵ David O. Selznick’s *Gone with the Wind* became one of the top-grossing movies of all time. It was based on the novel of the same name by Margaret Mitchell (1936) and it is centered on life in the antebellum South from the Civil War to Reconstruction.

As Paul Robeson was a social activist he started to speak out against segregation and racism. But instead of finding support on behalf of negroes, he encountered fear, shame and even rejection. His growing political and racial consciousness transformed him into “the first of the controversial black political prisoners, the first of [the American] black artists to have his art denied him.” (idem: 95).

The Second World War brought an end to the “consistently frivolous, spirited, and screwballish” (idem: 118) era of the thirties. During the forties a new generation of black actors emerged and with it the representations of blacks followed two different directions: on the one hand, Negroes as entertainers and on the other hand, Negroes in war movies side-by-side with white soldiers. From Bogle’s point of view “the Negro Entertainment Syndrome” (idem: 118) was the standard procedure for handling black personalities throughout the war years. In almost every American movie in which an African American appeared, the myth that Negroes were naturally rhythmic and natural born entertainers was maintained. But the black actors of the forties were no longer villains, jesters or servants. They “exchanged their mops and pails for zoot suits and sequined gowns.” (idem).

Two of the few Hollywood all-Negro musicals of this decade were MGM’s *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) and Twentieth Century Fox’s *Stormy Weather* (1943). Both movies reached the all-black movie houses and were enthusiastically greeted by black audiences in the South. Moreover both, in their own way, tried to break away from stereotyped situations and characterization recalling earlier all-black films.

2.4. Intergrationism: a step to an interracial future

America’s participation in the war in order to help fight against the “rise of fascism and its rabid «Master Race» ideology in Europe” (Guerrero 1993: 26) led the American government to appeal to national unity. This complicated Americans’ lives as they became aware of the racism and discrimination that still existed within their own country. In 1942 the Office of War Information was set up to stress American unity, implementing a policy through which racial themes in cinema were censored. Thus the liberal consciousness that struck the nation had immediate reflections in the film industry and the prospect of redefining Du Bois’s “twoness” was opened up. In his article “The Black Presence in American Cinema”, Jim Pines claims:

There was now a conscious effort to project «positive» images of blacks, to stress humanistic (as opposed to caricatured) qualities, and to focus more sharply on the social and inter-personal dynamics of race relations in contemporary American society. (1997: 501).

Consequently moviegoers witnessed major changes in the representation of blacks in the war films produced in the forties. Each of the major studios “had entered upon the 1949 message movie cycle.” (Cripps 1993: 219). The arrival of this new trend was marked by four films: Stanley Kramer’s *Home of the Brave*; Louis De Rochmont’s *Lost Boundaries* ; Darryl Zanuck’s *Pinky* and Clarence Brown’s *Intruder in the Dust*. Cripps believes “[t]hese films became the cycle that carried the central metaphor of integrationism into the civil rights movement” (idem: 220), for the blacks were cast as Negroes who “had their color stamped indelibly upon them, and they suffered, struggled, bled, yet endured.” (Bogle 2004: 142).

Home of the Brave was directed by Mark Robson and it was based on the play with the same name by Arthur Laurent. The movie was filmed using the provisional title *High Noon*. The film has an optimistic ending since Mossy (James Edwards) and his amputee buddy Mingo (Frank Lovejoy) walk toward an interracial future. Mingo and Mossy discuss the possibility of opening a bar. Still there is a tinge of white supremacy because it is the white man who offers his hand to the black one. Besides this, Cripps argues that “a one-armed white man equals one whole Negro.” (1993: 224).

Alfred Werker’s *Lost Boundaries* was based on a *Reader’s Digest* true story of a light-skinned Negro family that passes as whites. They settle in a small village for two decades and participate actively in the community affairs until their neighbours find out their “cultural roots”. In the end everything is solved and the shameful townspeople, who heard a special sermon on tolerance delivered by the town’s white minister, hold out their hands to their former friends once again.

Pinky was directed by Elia Kazan and it was based on the novel by Cid Ricketts Sumner – *Quality*. *Pinky* was the first feature film to focus on an interracial romance. The fair-skinned Negro nurse, Pinky, goes to the South and sacrifices her personal happiness because she has pride in her race. Like all tragic mulattoes, though Pinky is not completely fulfilled, she ends up being a wiser woman. Thus the film ends in an optimistic «everything’s-gonna-work-out-fine tone». (Bogle 2004: 152).

In *Intruder in the Dust* a proud black man, Lucas Beauchamp, who has dared to act like a white, is accused of killing a white man in the South. Although he is innocent, he doesn't tell the truth as he doesn't want the townspeople to be in trouble. Bogle argues that the message the film transmits is that "a black man on trial has little chance for justice" (idem: 155) in America.

The times were changing and so were people's mentalities. So the African American actor previously depicted as a coon or comic relief was depicted into a new idealized stereotype, the «Noble» or «Self-sacrificing Negro», in other words, the model of the integrationist hero. In *Making Movies Black*, Thomas Cripps defines this hero as being "[t]he restrained black who withholds himself from whites until they accept him on his merits, who commands the frame by standing apart, who demands neither hero worship nor condescension". (1993: 245).

The black actor who best suited the model of the integrationist age was Sidney Poitier²⁶. His success was assured by his educated and intelligent, demeanor, proper English accent and his conservative appearance which met with mass white moviegoing audiences' hopes and expectations. In this way, for black audience he became a hero for their cause as he was the paragon of black middle-class values and virtues. In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* Bogle admits Sidney Poitier "was neither crude nor loud, and, most important; he did not carry any ghetto cultural baggage with him. No dialect. No shuffling. No African cultural past. And he was almost totally devoid of rhythm." (2004: 176). He did not entertain on any level.

Poitier made his debut in Joseph Mankiewicz's *No Way Out* (1950), which launched the cycle of the problem pictures in the fifties. In the film Dr. Luther Brooks (Sidney Poitier), a young Negro doctor, works at an urban hospital. He treats two thieves who are wounded but one of them dies and the other accuses the doctor of his pal's death. Throughout the film the decent black doctor struggles to prove his innocence which he finally manages to do through an autopsy. The black doctor's goodness and humanity pleased a mass audience: both white and black.

From 1953 to 1958 Sidney Poitier starred in six motion pictures: *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955); *Something of Value* (1957); *Band of Angels* (1957); *Edge of the City* (1957); *The Mark of the Hawk* (1958) and *The Defiant Ones* (1958). In *The Edge of the City* and in

²⁶ Sidney Poitier was born on 20th February 1927. His parents were a poor Bahamian couple who lived in Miami, Florida.

The Defiant Ones Poitier's characters sacrifice themselves to help their white buddy. Besides functioning as a moral message to white America, in his book *Making Movies Black*, Cripps suggests these films transmit the message that "Negroes were «innately white men with black skins»". (1993: 289).

While the fifties had been "an era to be remembered as apathetic and sleepy-eyed, vulgar and hypocritical, grandiose, spectacular, and tasteless" (Bogle 2004: 159), the sixties were turbulent, guarded and paranoid. Black headstrong militants introduced and spread black rage, black anger and black power with the goal of putting an end to the ideology of integrationism. Society was willing to confront its unsolved ills and to embrace the reforms. After all John Fitzgerald Kennedy had given them hope when he "boasted in his Inaugural Address²⁷ that he was the first President «born in this century»" and added "that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans." (Chafe 1986: 177).

The sixties became a crucial decade for the African American Movement. It was an era that started with sit-ins, boycotts and marches because black leaders were increasingly frustrated due to the fact that politicians didn't carry out their promises. Demonstrations and movements spread throughout the nation under the influence of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. While the former advocated passive resistance the latter advocated separatism and black pride. "[B]lack rage, black anger and black power" Bogle 2004: 195) soon replaced the ideology of integrationism with almost absolute separatism.

Despite the great changes, Hollywood "continued with its brotherly-love everything's-going-to-be-dandy escapist movies, assuming the audiences would still believe in them." (idem: 219). So the integrationist message philosophy of the message movies from the fifties was mirrored in the films produced throughout the sixties, namely in: John Ford's *Sergeant Rutledge*²⁸ (1960); Robert Mulligan's *To Kill a Mockingbird*²⁹ (1962) and all of Sidney Poitier's films – *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961); *In the Heat of the Night* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1967).

²⁷ John Fitzgerald Kennedy's Inaugural Address dates back to 20th January 1961.

²⁸ In an attempt to recast the Western Cavalry film in black-related terms, *Sergeant Rutledge* highlights the black contribution to the expansion of the American frontier and articulates a pro-black theme of racial equality.

²⁹ In *To Kill a Mockingbird* the prejudice against the African American community is emphasised as a disturbing sickness. One of the film's strongest messages lies with the children who appear in the movie as being the future generation. The children represent a society in the future where prejudice has no place or meaning whatsoever.

2.5. Blaxploitation: superheroes versus super villains

At the end of the sixties, Hollywood was near economic collapse for it could no longer appeal to a mass family audience. After Vietnam, Watergate and Richard Nixon's resignation from presidency, a cynical and disillusioned mood invaded the country. Black intellectuals were extremely unhappy with the demeaning portrayals of African American life that Hollywood insisted on putting on the screen. Both critics and audiences at large "began to perceive the neutered or counterfeit sexuality of Poitier's role as obsolete and insulting" (Guerrero 1993: 72) since at that time African Americans were determined to join the militants of the black cause in order to fight for their rights.

Hollywood moguls became aware of the consumer power of the black audience and realized that black-oriented films could be the solution to the threatened economic position of the industry. So as Bogle states, "[f]or the first time in film history, the studios produced black-oriented films pitched directly at pleasing blacks". (2004: 232).

In this way the beginning of the seventies witnessed the rise of "original views of fiercely independent black heroes" (Lev 2000: 127-128) from Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), Gordon Park's *Shaft* (1971) and *Superfly* (1972). All these films mirrored the prevailing trends and concerns of the African American community by using slang, music, fashion and a new assertive attitude.

Sweetback's Baadasssss Song is an independently produced film which presents a bad nigger who violently challenges the white system and wins. The film ends with the threatening message: "A BAADASSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT DUES." (Bogle 2004: 235).

Shaft and *Superfly* were both produced within the Hollywood system and they show independent characters (detective John Shaft and drug pusher Priest, respectively) living within the social reality of the time. African Americans could then play strong roles as detectives, cowboys, superheroes, super villains and black bucks. Black violence, black comedy and a host of new black action films were in vogue. These films were codified into a genre called "Blaxploitation". This term was coined by black activist Junius Griffin³⁰ in the summer of 1972.

In their article on "Blaxploitation", Eithne Quinn and Peter Krämer explain that "African Americans have faced an extraordinary history of race-based exploitation and the

³⁰ Junius Griffin was head of the Hollywood branch of the NAACP.

charged term “blaxploitation” brought to mind long-standing and continuing racial experiences and injustices in times of new black self-awareness and pride.” (2006: 191). Black audiences longed for a black hero who was far from the integrationist hero of the sixties, and to a certain extent most blaxploitation films did provide them with what they wished for. “[O]ften the rough-tough-cream-puff militant-stud-buck heroes were no more authentic than the servants of the 1930s or the entertainers of the 1940s” (Bogle 2004: 242). However all the marginal figures (pimps, outlaws, rebels, etc) that were portrayed were the results of Hollywood’s development of more subtle and masked forms of devaluing African Americans on the screen. As a result black rights organizations started criticizing blaxploitation films as having a corrupting influence on young blacks in particular. Hence Hollywood moguls were unwilling to invest large amounts of money in black-oriented films.

By the mid-to-late 70s, Hollywood’s investment in films with African American themes diminished significantly because the mainstream industrial focus was turned on multi-million dollar blockbusters. The choice was to make crossover films which showcased the talent of individual African American performers. These films, in which blacks and whites starred as buddies, put an end to the threatening black figures of the seventies. For instance, in the *Star Wars* cycle Billy Dee Williams played as friend figure Lando Calrissian.

The comedian Richard Pryor epitomized the fast-talking coon type. In this sense Pryor represented a revival of an old coon caricature, a comic thief, foil and asexual sidekick to the white protagonist. In 1976 Pryor costarred with Gene Wilder in the movie *Silver Streak* (1976), turning it into a hit with his comedic energy, and later again in *Stir Crazy* (1980). As the decade came to an end the menacing figures of the seventies slowly gave way to the rising interracial buddy films. Hence in the eighties the black man was once more depicted as a coon, a Tom or a mammy. Major African American stars were either part coon/part buck or part coon/part mammy or Tom. Thus this decade is sometimes referred to as the age of the hybrid stereotypes. Derogatory characters from the past are combined with modern social issues to create contemporary African American stereotypes that feature heavily in mainstream movies, which I shall focus in the following chapter.

Chapter Three

Race Issues in 1980s mainstream Cinema

3.1. The eighties' political, social and cultural context

In the eighties, as a result of Reaganite policies, American society witnessed “a rebirth of national spirit and the restoration of «traditional» values in such varied spheres as judicial decision-making and private moral behavior” (Schaller 1992: 67). Supposedly, it all started on November 4th, 1980, when Ronald Wilson Reagan was elected the 40th President of the U.S.A. His whole campaign had been based on the strength of simplistic pledges, namely: making America strong again, annihilating the “evil-empire” of communism and restoring the values of family, church and work. Furthermore, in his campaign in 1980, Ronald Reagan pitched himself as the messenger of a new order based on old virtues, such as honour, heroism, courage, decency and patriotism. Therefore he implemented sweeping new political and economic initiatives. Among them were the control of the money supply to reduce inflation and the encouragement of economic growth by reducing tax rates. As Reagan was an advocate of free markets he believed great changes had to be made in relation to some excessive and misguided welfare programs which had been enacted during the 1960s and 1970s. From his point of view, these programs were responsible for hampering the American economy. Thus in his first inauguration speech, which he himself authored, he claimed “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem.”

In 1984 he proclaimed he was re-elected in order to renew American faith and hope; Reagan declared it was “Morning in America”. This was actually the opening line of the 1984 presidential campaign of Republican Party incumbent Ronald Reagan. The political campaign television commercial featured a montage of images of Americans going to work and it was accompanied by a calm, optimistic narration suggesting the improvement of the U.S. economy since 1980. The full text of the ad read as follows:

It's morning again in America. Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates at about

half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon 6,500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It's morning again in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?

Economic growth during the Reagan Recovery ended up being so selective that in the mid-decade a new social category emerged – the yuppies. As a matter of fact, the magazine *Newsweek* actually called 1984 – the year of the yuppie. Yuppies appreciated comforts, indulged themselves with luxurious products like Porsches and BMWs, expensive sneakers, designer clothes and put a high value on living well and looking good. Thus many Americans felt there were almost no limits to the good life they could have.

Though the President had spoken of “Morning in America”, the sun began to set on some traditional industries which were forced to make their workers redundant. Hence the unemployment rate rose, remaining higher than in most years from 1947 to 1973. Real wages which had begun to stagnate in the 70s, continued to do so during the Reagan years. Ethnic minorities were the most likely to be poor, as they had had poor educations and very few had skills. With his measures Reagan ended up dividing the nation by sex, class and race. Reagan’s America was white, male and well-off. In general skin colour determined the social status and economic power was in the hands of those who were perceived as white. Consequently throughout the Reagan years, black middle-class workers were almost twice as likely as their white counterparts to become unemployed.

During the 80s the black middle-class lost many of the gains that it had achieved during the previous three decades. Reagan opposed certain pieces of civil rights legislation, for instance The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which had been signed into the law by President Lyndon Baines Johnson. The majority of the black population was limited to “low-income housing, dead-end or non-existent jobs, and a welfare state that offered little or any opportunity of escape” (Chafe: 1990: 155).

The great social differences during the 80s between poor minority groups and affluent white groups were clearly mirrored in the American urban patterns. Due to American pattern of urbanization, a great number of residential areas were beyond the pocket of many minorities, especially African-Americans. The openness of the suburbs to

minorities remained questionable although, in theory, fair housing legislation diminished racial exclusion. Despite the existence of that legislation, it did not shield racial and ethnic minorities from prejudice and distrust. As a consequence there was an increase of bands of homeless people wandering the cities and migrating to the country. Among those homeless were women and children who lived on the streets, in parks or in subway stations, begging both for money and food. However Reagan dismissed the issue by suggesting “homeless people were either nuts or people who enjoyed their lifestyle.” (Schaller 1992: 79).

Even though the gap between whites and blacks was increasing more and more, Reagan did not tackle these social issues. Consequently there was an increase in violence and crime within the black communities, which helped to spread the idea that racial minorities were a real threat to all law-abiding citizens. As Reagan considered security one of his priorities, black neighbourhoods started to have intense policing which led to a general feeling of being harassed. As the mistrust between police and ethnic minorities deepened, young black men had more difficulty in proving their innocence. In order to narrow the gap between both groups, some police departments hired more black agents than those indicated by the quota system. The presence of black agents paired with white partners in problematic areas seemed to be positive as it fostered better feelings. This promotion of racial minorities in the police departments was essential to help create the idea that blacks and whites were sharing equal opportunities within structures of power.

As black Americans started realizing that President Reagan was unaware of or uninterested in the growing discontent of the black community, they decided it was a time for them to make an effort to fit into society and to assure their rights by participating in different events and activities. Only in this way would their voices be heard. They were no longer going to see their problems being swept under the carpet. A great example of this social philosophy was Jesse Louis Jackson, Sr’s campaign in 1984. Furthermore, due to MTV “the black superstar reigned supreme in the entertainment industry)” (Bogle 2004: 268) in this decade. Gradually some African American singers made their debut, namely Tina Turner, Donna Summer, Michael Jackson, Prince, Whitney Houston and Janet Jackson, among many others. The number one prime-time television program at the time was *The Cosby Show*. Bill Cosby starred in this sitcom which highlighted the experience and growth of an upper middle-class African American family living in Brooklyn, New York. In the 1980s television was transformed due to the advent of cable TV. As Tom

O'Brien states "[i]n early eighties, TV did better than film, at least in giving blacks greater visibility" (1990: 162).

3.2. Interracial buddy movies

Since the dominant ideology of every culture is embedded in its cultural products, including films, Hollywood too struggled to assure Americans that there was no different treatment between the races. As it is one of Hollywood's major concerns to maximize box-office profits, the solution at the time was to attract the widest possible audience by appealing to both black and white audiences. In this sense, the main goal of the 1980s was to rid American movies of the rebellious figures of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this way the movies of the 80s led audiences to believe that the menacing black male figures no longer existed in large numbers because they had been tamed or absorbed into the system. Hence Donald Bogle asserts that "the 1980s might be called the Era of Tan, a time when films did all they could to make audiences forget the blackness of a black star." (Bogle 2004: 268).

Biracial buddy movies have proved to be an effective way to attract all audiences, since in these movies the black men offer themselves to solve the problems of mainstream society. So race is frequently relegated to being a non-issue in these films. In fact some of the detective roles were initially written for white stars. For instance *Beverly Hills Cop* was originally written for Sylvester Stallone and not for Edward Reagan "Eddie" Murphy; as was *Lethal Weapon* written for Nicholas "Nick" Nolte and not for Danny Glover. Though these films pair black and white stars, the black characters are typically portrayed entirely within white constitutional contexts. In the 80s some critics considered the variant of biracial buddy movies as a strategy not only to exploit but also to contain black male stars. In this sense the buddy formula works as a politically-correct representation of white and black people who manage to overcome their differences and work together towards a common goal. Hence anxieties about the racial tensions within a growing pluralized society end up being introduced, developed and resolved through interracial buddy films. As biracial buddy movies place a white man side by side with a black man, these films are a way of neutralising some of the ghosts that still haunted the American social structure of the 80s.

As blacks in the 80s appeared in the company of white male stars and had to appeal to white audiences, black characters generally reproduced crude stereotypes sugar-coated with comedy. Thus Ed Guerrero states that “Hollywood put the black filmic presence in the protective custody, so to speak, of a white lead or co-star and therefore in conformity with white sensibilities and expectations of what blacks, essentially, should be” (Guerrero 1993: 128). In fact the majority of the black detectives were merely sidekicks to the central white heroes, neutralising rather than exploring issues of race. Thus the black sidekick of the 80s biracial buddy movie was presented as an action-oriented man who offered his black energy to save the white hero, somehow “occupying either a secondary or largely supportive role.” (Tasker 1995: 43). From the outset of the narrative, the characterization of white and black association in these films is one of resolution and friendship, albeit the black performer continued to direct wisdom and unnerving loyalty towards his white friend. Even the fiercest of adversaries, despite racial oppositions, eventually bonded to become partners in the action-oriented buddy movies of the 80s.

Generally the interracial partnerships perpetuated depictions of fantasy or utopian racial camaraderie within buddy films. However, according to Donald Bogle these depictions of those movie relationships are fraudulent as they are racially one-sided: “[s]uch movie friendships have usually held to one dictum: namely, that interracial buddies can be such only when the white buddy is in charge.” (Bogle 2004: 272).

A prominent African American actor who featured in some enormous box-office successes which blend moments of pure violence and spectacle with flavours of comedy was Eddie Murphy, who can be regarded as the coon type, according to Bogle’s classification. Most of the films in which he features offer a stereotyped image of black masculinity and the embodiment of black subculture as far as attitude, fashion and music are concerned. From 1980 to 1984 television audiences had been acquainted with him for four seasons on the comedy series *Saturday Night Live*³¹. But it was later that Eddie Murphy became the biggest crossover star of the decade. In most of the films of the 80s in which he stars, Murphy “represents the loose, jivey, close to vulgar black man, who does not threaten the white audiences’ feelings of superiority” (idem: 281). Moreover he doesn’t challenge racial attitudes; although his movies seem to address issues of racism, they actually take no stand at all.

³¹ *Saturday Night Live* premiered on 11th October 1975 under the title *NBC’S Saturday Night*

In fact Eddie Murphy's rise to stardom began with Walter Hill's action saga *48Hours*³² (1982). In the movie Jack Cates (Nick Nolte) is a detective who is at odds with the system he serves due to his use of unorthodox methods. He is out to hunt a cop killer called Albert Ganz (James Remar). But to do that he needs the help of another convict, one of Ganz's former partners, named Reggie Hammond (Eddie Murphy). As Reggie is aware that Ganz is after half a million dollars which Reggie had hid in the trunk of his own car, Reggie is willing to cooperate with Jack. The detective gets permission to spring Reggie from jail on a two day pass (48 hours) and the pair set off strolling the city's mean streets in search for Ganz.

The master-servant dichotomy is present throughout the movie. Even though Reggie Hammond is set temporarily free, he is out on the streets accompanied by Jack Cates and he is constantly reminded that he is black and a convict. Besides this he is constantly insulted by Jack who calls him "watermelon", "nigger", "overdressed charcoal colored loser", "asshole" and "shithead". Reggie is depicted "playing by the rules" of the white man. He is the only prominent black character in *48 Hours*, but he is isolated from his family and friends. In fact the film's real action hero is the white protagonist who contains some features that characterized the man of the 80s, for instance: decisiveness, toughness and mastery.

Reggie Hammond is a medium-built, fast talking streetwise black man who doesn't seem to take Jack's insults seriously, or at least for him, expressions of prejudice and discrimination do not matter much as long as deeds express otherwise. However Reggie does not hesitate to talk back and he is always ready to play on Jack's stereotyped ideas about blacks.

In this sense *48 Hours* does not offer a rational presentation to racial difference, which are "fantastically" worked out and solved through different strategies which make the audience happy, namely the inclusion of a black buddy who is used especially for comedy effects. Humour is used throughout the film to deal with the racial problems. Thus the inherent racism that exists in the movie is greatly neutralized by the fact that Reggie never becomes enraged or really truly angry.

Whereas at the beginning of the film Jack Cates and Reggie Hammond are on hostile terms, after some conflict and tension they end up discovering friendship and mutual

³² *48Hours* ranked 5th among the top grossing films of 1983 and it earned more than \$ 77 million.

respect. Therefore, towards the end, Jack can justify the use of his initial remarks and hostility by saying he was just doing his job. In this sense the responsibility of Jack's racist behaviour is shifted onto the system itself. One of the scenes which best shows Cates's respect, loyalty and cooperation towards Reggie Hammond is at the police station when Cates is shouted at for protecting a "nigger convict". Cates reacts by shouting back at the police chief saying that "this man [Hammond] has got more brains than you'll ever know. He's got more guts than any partner I ever had," and literally handcuffs himself to Hammond. This scene resembles *The Defiant Ones* (1958) in which John 'Joker' Jackson (Toni Curtis) and Noah Cullen (Sidney Poitier), two escaped convicts, are chained together and therefore they must co-operate with one another in order to survive.

As the narrative advances the use of shot reverse-shot becomes less frequent since both men start occupying a space in the same shot as two inseparable buddies. The very last scenes contrast with the very beginning when Jack Cates walks along the prison corridor towards Reggie's cell and the audience hear someone singing the song *Roxanne*. The very first time Reggie is seen, he is in his cell prison sitting in an armchair, wearing a hat and sunglasses. Hence at first he looks suspiciously like an old-style coon, who has to be disempowered but then throughout the film he fights for respect and recognition when in the custody of Jack.

Despite being released in 1990 *Another 48 Hours* is a repetition of the narrative and visual strategies used in *48 Hours* though the latter has more scenes of violence as there is plenty of shotgun use, slayings, car chases and bodies crashing through windows. Once again Reggie and veteran police officer Jack reunite to find an unscrupulous drug dealer who calls himself "The Ice man" (Brion James) and once again they only have forty-eight hours to fulfil their task.

At the beginning Reggie is also framed in prison but this time he is more active and self-assured, which contrast with his coon-like attitude in *48 Hours*. Though Reggie is not the action hero of the film, he ends up being the star. For great parts of the film he carries a gun with him; after all he is free, no longer a black convict in the custody of a white police.

While in *48 Hours* Hammond is basically the only black character, in this sequel more black convicts are introduced. As a matter of fact it is a black male convict who actually helps Reggie and Jack find "The Ice/man". Even though blacks are still outnumbered and isolated from a wider black context, in *Another 48 Hours*, Eddie Murphy

ends up being the rich successful respected figure whose coonish roots are never completely dispelled or disavowed. So *Another 48 Hours* presents a more progressive attitude towards the image of African Americans on screen, placing black and white heroes almost on an equal footing throughout the movie. However, at this time Eddie Murphy's popularity and career seemed to be in decline. Whereas in *48 Hours* Hammond was the one who tried to assimilate, here the tension has been shifted to another marginal group, namely Asians. This time the social misfits who are unable to communicate in English and who seem to shut themselves off from the white world are the Asian characters. Hence Chinatown becomes a place where misfits seem to be congregate.

Unlike in the previous film, the racist insults and degrading remarks about Hammond's skin colour are eliminated in *Another 48 Hours*. Likewise the racial conflict between Cates and Hammond is omitted. Cates is now depicted as the true friend and he becomes the action hero who saves Hammond's life in the end, though he has to shoot him in the shoulder. Unlike at the end of the *48 Hours*, in *Another 48 Hours* both protagonists declare their love for one another, as Hammond is accepted as a peer. After killing "The Ice man" Cates assures him "He [Jack's friend and fellow cop] wasn't my friend, you [Reggie Hammond] are my friend". Furthermore here Hammond doesn't go back to prison but he is taken to hospital by the paramedics to have his wound seen to. As the ambulance drives away, Jack realizes that Reggie took his lighter again, just as he had done in *48 Hours*.

In 1984, Martin Brest's *Beverly Hills Cop* turned Eddie Murphy into a movie superstar. The Detroit detective Axel Foley (Eddie Murphy), a keeper of the law, goes off to Beverly Hills in search of the men who murdered his best friend Mikey Tandino (James Russo). *Beverly Hills Cop II* carried on presenting Eddie isolated in white environments and narratives. It was directed by Tony Scott and released in 1987. In this sequel Axel Foley reunites with Beverly Hills detectives Billy Rosewood (Judge Reinhold) and John Taggart (John Ashton) to stop a group of international munitions smugglers who made Captain Andrew Bogomil (Ronny Cox) a victim of one of their crimes.

Seven years later in John Landis's *Beverly Hills Cop III*, Axel Foley goes back to Beverly Hills to stop a gang of car dealers who end up being responsible for the death of his boss. Once again Axel teams up with one of his buddies and his investigation takes him to an amusement park called Wonderworld. To make himself acceptable to white audiences the black Detroit dude, in his jeans, sneakers and sweatshirt makes use of jivetalk, a

peculiar laugh, voice variations and an ironic tone when he laments life's indignities and injustices.

The ending of all the three sequels are happy as the bad men are punished and the good and white protagonists end up being rewarded for their deeds. Throughout the films Eddie Murphy seems to be constantly proving his value to the white institutions. But still he never becomes enraged or really angry. Thus the scriptwriter's aim was to transmit the idea that America was hip and sophisticated enough not to be bothered by racist remarks in the 80s. Whenever there are scenes where race is probably part of the issue, in a certain sense the idea of racism "is suppressed altogether" (Bogle 2004: 285) "because Axel is a bluffer and because the scene is played for quick laughter" (idem). In all of Eddie Murphy's movies race, and to a lesser degree, class difference is the source of energy and tension, in other words race is deflected onto class.

In the *Beverly Hills Cop* sequels Eddie Murphy penetrates the exclusive all-white enclave and challenges the white "world" by crashing bars, parties, private supper clubs and even by appropriating cars, mansions and so on. When compared to *48 Hours* the *Beverly Hills Cop* series is different because Axel is the hero who has a white sidekick and not the reverse. He is actually the one who solves the problems. The audience become colour-blind, as Axel is completely cut off from any semblance of a black community. Besides this, both his best friend, Mikey Tandino, and his childhood friend are white and so are his Beverly Hills buddies: Billy Rosewood and Sergeant Taggart.

Besides opening doors to other black actors, Eddie Murphy's stardom also brought them hope. Later in the decade Danny Glover also became a star when he played the role of the trusty friend in *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989), *Lethal Weapon 3* (1992) and *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998), which are clearly a continuation of the biracial buddy film cycle that flourished during the eighties. In Richard Donner's films, drugs are framed as being the enemy which is responsible for the destruction of not only families but also of a nation. Moreover some complex questions that still haunted American society in the aftermath of Vietnam are also introduced, namely the Vietnam veteran's difficult reinsertion into civilian life and his consequent association with drugs. But in *Lethal Weapon I* drugs are a means of survival for a group of veterans who have returned home from the war. Unlike other veterans who were usually represented as being destroyed by the war, General Peter McAllister (Mitchell Ryan) and his men have remained strong and able

to fit into American post-Vietnam society, though their readjustment was achieved through crime and illegal activities.

Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson), who served in the U.S. Army Special Forces during the Vietnam War, is the real action hero whose masculinity is highlighted in all the sequels via his outstanding skill with guns. Riggs is an alienated suicidal cop who lives in a mobile home near the seaside and his only companion is his dog – Sam. His buddy, Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover), is a middle-aged, middle-class family man who symbolises stability. The black sergeant, who is the good version of the Vietnam Vet, lives with his wife Trish Murtaugh (Darlene Love) and their four children. In reality the main factor that allows Murtaugh to be framed as inferior to Riggs is his age. Apart from this, it precludes the possibility of showing him as an equally fit and strong man. He often refuses to engage in risky manoeuvres and frequently mutters phrases like “I’m too old for this shit.” Despite Riggs being the hero, Murtaugh is positioned as the good black character who lives a happy life and who poses no threat to the neat order established by white institutions. He embodies a whole range of acceptable black behaviour and attitudes as well as being an all-purpose father figure. Murtaugh “operates as a supportive, sometimes almost fatherly figure” (Tasker 1995: 44). According to Donald Bogle, the black buddies like Murtaugh perform a kind of servicing role, so that in scenario of “interracial male bonding, black men are a cross between toms and mummies: all-giving, all-knowing, all-sacrificing nurturers.” (Bogle 2004: 276).

In *Lethal Weapon II* the protagonists have to take on a gang of South African drug dealers, who are hiding behind diplomatic immunity. Racial injustice is thus displaced onto the extant Apartheid regime in South Africa. In *Lethal Weapon III* the dishonest cop, Jack Travis (Stuart Wilson) steals weapons from impounded items and sells them on the black market. He makes this worse by distributing armor-piercing bullets or “cop killers” and finally in *Lethal Weapon IV* a Chinese immigrant smuggling ring is investigated.

Similarly to what happens in the *Lethal Weapon* series, in the *Die Hard* series the audience is already acquainted with a “battered white man in the protective arms of a black man”. (Willis 1997: 27). In both films the heroes are the “familiar action film figure; the renegade cop who takes the law into his own hands and slaughters a series of criminals” (idem). In *Die Hard* Al Powell (Reginald Veljohnson) is the good-natured, plump policeman who befriends, watches and supports John McClane (Bruce Willis) from a

distance, who is making an effort to get his confused head straight while fighting against the “terrorists” inside the Nakatomi Skyscraper. Initially Al Powell is a passive figure but he manages to become masculinised due to his relationship with McClane; the formation and consolidation of masculinity is central to this film. Al Powell is featured as a friendly, reliable but essentially an unthreatening figure. He refuses to carry a gun, so he refuses the policeman’s role on the street. Furthermore he refuses to eat donuts “which are after all real policemen’s fare” (Tasker 1995: 44). Nevertheless in the last scene of *Die Hard*, when Al Powell and John McClane finally meet, Al Powell shoots Karl (Alexander Godunov) repeatedly so as to save his buddy’s life.

As it has been referred to before, interracial buddy movies give both black and white audiences the possibility of identifying themselves with the characters they see on the screen. Whenever black and white protagonists are placed side by side, on apparently equal footing in films, the idea that is reproduced is that America has found a solution to its racial problem. Whites and blacks seem to be equal in all circumstances. But upon a closer analysis, the concept of “melting pot” within the structure of interracial buddy films proves to be a mere strategy that reinforces the racial hierarchy which still keeps whites at the top of the social ladder.

3.3. Comedies

To a certain extent the biracial buddy films of the 80s may be considered a reaction to the black separatist movies of the previous decade. This meant Hollywood could put a limit on the number of black actors and black-focused narratives. However, there were some successful biracial buddy comedies which were released. As I have already referred to at the end of my second chapter, Richard Pryor co-starred with Gene Wilder in *Silver Streak* in 1976.

In 1980 Richard Pryor was reteamed with Gene Wilder in *Stir Crazy*. In this movie Skip Donahue (Gene Wilder) and Harry Monroe (Richard Pryor) decide to take a weird job which consists of promoting a bank. But this implies dressing up as woodpeckers and performing a song and dance routine. While they are taking a break one day, two men steal their costumes and rob a bank in them. Both Skip and Harry are immediately taken to prison and are later sentenced to 125 years. Here once again, as in *Silver Streak*, Harry gives Skip some clues as to how to avoid being mistreated in prison. According to Harry

one has to be 'bad', "which turns out to be a comic interpretation of Black urban toughness and cool." (Guerrero 1993: 241)

In *Brewster's Millions* (1987) Richard Pryor co-starred with John Candy. Montgomery "Monty" Brewster (Candy) is left 30 million dollars by his deceased great-uncle Rupert Horn (Hume Cronyn). Nevertheless as Monty has no concept of the quantity of money he has received and how much interest he could get from it, he makes bad bets, hires personal staff on astronomic salaries and takes expensive hotel suites. But Spike Nolan (Pryor) invests Monty's money in a wise way and he ends up recovering all his money and much more.

In *See no Evil, hear no Evil* (1989) once again Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder work together. Wallace "Wally" Karue (Richard Pryor), a blind man, and Dave Lyons (Gene Wilder), a deaf man, witness a murder. However, as the police don't consider them credible witnesses the two men agree to work together so that they can identify the murderers and justice can be done.

Towards the end of the 80s Richard Pryor's comedies had an exclusive aim which was to please the white movie-going public. In other words his "formulaic comedies had become ever more ossified and clichéd" (Guerrero 1993: 129), unlike his live stand-up shows which never lost their wildness and edginess.

While Pryor first won fame with black audiences and only then did he reach a broader audience, Eddie Murphy "had a large white constituency right from the very beginning" (Bogle 2004: 281). Whereas in the *Beverly Hills Cop* films Murphy penetrates the all-white enclave of Beverly Hills on assignment, in *Trading Places* (1983) he enters the white world of share trading by chance. In other words he is completely lifted out of a black community and put into a privileged cultural context so as to appeal to white audience. Nothing is known about his life, origin, past friends or relatives. All that is known is that he has recently been released from jail and he poses as a blind legless Vietnam veteran who begs on the streets of Philadelphia. Throughout the film Billy Ray Valentine (Eddie Murphy) is the only black person, who is invited to become a yuppie when he was offered a mansion with a butler, a car and even a \$80 000 year job.

The Duke brothers, Randolph (Ralph Bellamy) and Mortimer (Don Ameche) use Billy Ray Valentine (Murphy) and Louis Winthorpe III (Dan Aykroyd) as guinea pigs to prove their theory. While one believes wealth and power are consequences of hereditary

traits, the other claims that anyone can become a success as long as he has access to education and he is given the chance. To carry out their experiment the Duke brothers reverse the fortunes of Billy (Eddie Murphy) and Louis (Dan Aykroyd). So the low-life street hustler replaces the ambitious and successful financial wizard. The storyline can be considered a modern take on Mark Twain's classic 19th century novel *The Prince and the Pauper*.

Trading Places reverses the roles which are usually ascribed to whites and blacks in pictures and it raises interesting questions about race, class and the power of breeding and education. Furthermore the Wall Street myth of ambition, hard work, skill and even knowledge are challenged. After all Billy (Eddie Murphy), a nifty hustler, ends up doing as well as anyone who has adequate education and profile. The white Philadelphian Blueblood is replaced by a low-life hustler, who actually manages to succeed at the top. Moreover after finding out about the Duke brothers' bet, Billy achieves a skilful revenge by causing their ruin, with the help of his newly acquired buddy – Louis (Dan Aykroyd).

By placing Eddie Murphy "into an acceptable cultural context" (Bogle 2004: 284) and co-starring with a white actor, Hollywood managed to make *Trading Places* successful among white audiences. Though it marked the first of Eddie Murphy's collaborations with the director John Landis, it was a critically acclaimed movie. Thus it became the fourth highest earning film of 1983 after it had remained in the top ten highest grossing films until its eighteenth week of commercial release.

3.4. *The Color Purple* - controversy

The "era's most talked about black-oriented film" (Bogle 2004: 292) is Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (1985). The film is based on the 1982 epistolary novel by the American author Alice Walker. At the time it was published *The Color Purple* was one of the few books which dealt with black women living in poor circumstances and subject to abuse by men. Alice Walker exposed the difficulties of Black women's lives, struggling against a reality in which men are brutal and their principal victims are their wives, daughters and lovers, something that, it can be argued, written fiction was ready to cope with but not cinema.

To a certain extent Steven Spielberg followed Alice Walker's plot, but he had to alter a few scenes to make them appropriate for video distribution. Still the novel and the

movie have more similarities than differences. The black men: Mr.____ (Danny Glover), Harpo Johnson (Willard Pugh) and Old Mister Johnson (Adolph Caesar) are all introduced as “caricatured pawns” (idem). For instance, Mr.____ seems little more than the familiar black brute who is violent and oversexed. Although all the characters are enslaved by a dominant white culture, the pressures that the black men have to bear in a white society are never dramatized or suggested. The men only unleash their violence on women and never on one another, or on the whites who have presumably tormented them.

Even though sometimes Celie doesn’t show her fear, the visual contrast between Mr.____’s figure and her own serves to imply a towering presence that looms over her. This is done both through tilt shots of Mr.____ as well as when his shadow eclipses her.

Throughout the film Spielberg makes use of comic situations, and it is the male characters who are precisely the ones who are frequently laughed at. A good example is the scene when Albert is trying to prepare Shrug’s breakfast and he ends up burning everything because he uses kerosene to lighten up the fire.

In spite of Mr.____ undergoing a transformation in the film, the audience hardly perceive it. In other words “Albert’s awakening” as Walker put it, is not portrayed in the movie. Instead, Spielberg focuses on Albert’s tragic life, presenting him in a totally dirty house, with all the animals roaming around, and as a useless fellow completely addicted to alcohol.

The film, as the novel had done before it, caused a wide range of controversy which was evidenced in several ways. A significant number of African-Americans threatened to boycott the whole production for they saw it as a misrepresentation of the black community, more precisely of black men. Despite playing an important role in helping Hollywood accept the idea of large mixed audiences for films with black stars, the film *The Color Purple* tends to focus more on intra-black hostilities in an especially superficial way.

3.5. Interracial relations revisited

Towards the end of the decade Hollywood began to foreground racial issues. However, although some interest in race was shown, a more concerted examination of the subject was avoided. The following films are examples of this: *Cry Freedom* (1987), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Glory* and *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989). All these four films were released in the eighties but their plots are not set in this decade. So they depict

situations of racism that existed in the recent past. In this way the currency of the issues exposed was largely avoided. Moreover they all focus on racism but somehow explore it through white eyes. Hence mass white audiences were especially attracted to the white characters that are presented in them.

Sir Richard Attenborough's *Cry Freedom* is set in South Africa in 1977. It is based on a pair of books by the editor of *Daily Dispatch* – Donald Woods. At the time the film was considered a provocative, courageous attempt to make audiences aware of the brutalities and injustices of Apartheid in South Africa. The 70s had been agitated years in South Africa, as there had been several political and student organisations set up with the aim of protesting against Apartheid. Many of the people depicted in *Cry Freedom* were real and the events are broadly factual. The first scenes of the film show the African people's lives, including many of the hardships they had to face. Their only hope of better days is symbolically represented by posters of both Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko, which can be seen on their slum walls.

Throughout the first part of the film the director focuses on Biko's (Denzel Hayes Washington) friendship with a white South African journalist Woods (Kevin Kline). Both men visit many places which are only for non-whites – black townships, and Donald Woods becomes acquainted with both Biko's mission and the real situation of the true victims of Apartheid. As he is an editor, he believes he can help his friend fight for this noble cause – "Build a South Africa for equals, black or white." So he provides political support to Biko by writing in his newspaper and controversially hiring black journalists.

As Biko is an intelligent and very determined man, he represents a threat to the South African government. Despite having been prevented by the government from leaving his defined banning area, he mingles among the African crowds and makes political speeches defending Black Consciousness³³ whenever he can. This leads him to prison where he later dies in police custody under suspicious circumstances. According to the Minister of Justice (and this information appears in the credits of the film), Steve Biko died on "Hunger strike".

After Biko's death Donald Woods meets Jimmy Kruger (John Edward Thaw), the Minister of Justice, to try to expose to him the police's complicity in Biko's death. However, Woods only succeeds in being declared a bad person so he is forbidden to

³³ The Black Consciousness Movement was created by students who were influenced by the American Black Power Movement. The leader of the movement was Stephen Bantu Biko.

associate with more than one person at a time and is forbidden to write anything for five years.

Biko's death takes place in the first third of the film. The rest of the film centres on Donald Woods's effort to get himself and his family out of South Africa. As he is placed under house arrest he decides to seek asylum in England where he can publish his book on the life of his friend Biko. Only then will he be able to expose the corrupt and racist nature of the South African authorities.

As far as race is concerned *Cry Freedom* briefly focuses on heroism, loyalty, leadership, on the horrors of Apartheid and the martyrdom of a rare man but then it goes on to concentrate on the suffering of a good white family in a rather more detailed way. The bigger drama, the ghastly repression which affected twenty million South African Black inhabitants, is only hinted at through a few appearances by Denzel Washington in the role of Steve Biko. Thus in *Cry Freedom*, as in *Mississippi Burning* and *Glory*, the Afro-Americans' struggle is a subtext for white heroism.

Both *Mississippi Burning* and *Glory* are based on true-life events that occurred in the United States. The former presents the disappearance and murder of three Civil Rights Workers (one black Southerner – James Chaney, two white Northerners – Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman) in the State of Mississippi in 1964. The latter is based on the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry – one of the first formal units of the U.S. Army to be made up entirely of African-American men (apart from the officers). Hence the film dates back to the nineteenth century.

With *Mississippi Burning*, Alan Parker tried to depict a positive side of the sixties – the search for social justice which the eighties seemed to have forgotten. Hence the whole film shows the struggle of two FBI agents, Robert Anderson (Gene Hackman) and Alan Ward (Willem Dafoe) to unlock the mystery and find the killers in rural Jessup County, Missouri. But they have to face a war zone of terror and violence because the local law-enforcement officers and the members of the Ku Klux Klan are not willing to give up the *status quo*. The few black characters who appear are featured as sad-eyed, submissive dolts who are tired of the white residents and their violence but they are also too afraid to open their mouths or make a decisive move. So they go on seeing their houses, churches, barns and animals being torched while they are intimidated, beaten or lynched. The most aggressive African American is a teenager called Darius McCrary, who is willing to speak

out but he simply loses his courage due to his father's fearful look. Shockingly one evening Darius turns into a sacrificial lamb when the KKK attack a black church. As the KKK members arrive, the congregation flees but the poor boy remains behind kneeling and praying in front of the church door.

Alan Parker was aware that the only way to get financing was to render his film in Hollywood's conventions. Therefore he made the FBI agents central by turning them into heroes and blended issues of social protest with the buddy subgenre which was standard in all police-action dramas of the 80s. Hence *Mississippi Burning* has some misrepresentations and some fictionalization of history. The FBI agents are depicted as heroes. In the movie there is a black FBI male (played by Badja Djola) who intimidates the mayor in order to obtain some information for the investigation. As is known, this is a complete falsification since the FBI didn't have any black agents in the 60s. Moreover the audience who watch the movie are given completely the wrong idea that black Southerners didn't do anything to fight for and bring about civil rights. All their efforts through organizing and making marches, sit-ins and boycotts are completely omitted.

Glory is another film which is responsible for bringing to audiences a part of American history which many had never heard of before – the story of the 54th Regiment. The film is based on the letters of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, a fact which is mentioned in the opening titles. Colonel Robert Shaw was an officer in the Federal Army during the American Civil War, who volunteered to lead the first company of black soldiers. Director Edward Zwick's aim was not only to present a historical narrative but also to problematize and correct Hollywood representation of the Civil War in particular and of African Americans in general. But instead of concentrating exclusively on black experiences, the movie reconstructs the 54th Regiment through the interwoven narratives of six main characters: the two white men – Colonel Robert Gould Shaw (Matthew Broderick) and his second-in-command, who was his childhood friend, Major Cabot Forbes (Cary Elwes) and four black soldiers: John Rawlins (Morgan Freeman), Thomas Searles (Andre Braugher), Silas Trip (Denzel Washington) and Jupiter Sharts (Jihmi Kennedy).

Throughout the film the audience witnesses the maturing of Robert Shaw from an insecure young twenty-five-year old officer to a fully-fledged leader. This is obtained through the depiction of a specific cultural and psychological context away from the troops and battlefields. In other words, the audience has access to his abolitionist family

background, his perspective and self-doubts. Even though he is forced to deal with the prejudices of not only those who had given orders to kill the commanding officers of blacks but also of his own fellow officers, his awareness of racial prejudice turns him into a sensitive hero.

The introduction of the black soldiers changes the rhythm, progress and development of *Glory*. The four black men's representation ends up being typological for they are all differentiated in terms of class, position and character. John Rawlins is an older philosophical grave-digger. He is an experienced man aware of life's great injustices. Besides this, he is able to control the black soldiers and establish some order and peace in his own camp tent; therefore he represents the father figure.

Thomas Searles, one of Robert's friends from Boston, is an eastern-educated free black man with refined manners. He is the only one who goes up to Robert and wishes him a happy Christmas. Due to his character he has great difficulty in fighting like a real soldier, so he is frequently scolded by Sergeant Mulcahy and patronized by Silas Trip. Nevertheless, as the film proceeds, Thomas takes on an increasing understanding of a specifically black consciousness, to the point that when he is wounded in battle he says he "is not going back". This expression has a double meaning: on the one hand he is not willing to go back to his life of comfort in Boston and on the other hand he no longer wishes to live as a favoured black man in an all-white culture. Here he seems to have embraced a black identity.

Silas Trip is a rebellious runaway slave, whose mother died when he was born. His private talk patterns, his youth and his highly developed physique fit in with the Hollywood stereotype of the "buck". He sees racism more clearly than the others because he has faced hardships none of the whites had ever experienced. Hence he patronizes his comrades insisting they are still "niggers" even if they are soldiers in blue uniforms. He is the only black soldier who deserts and is whipped in front of all the others. Though his back was full of scars and his feet are dreadfully wounded, he doesn't utter a word. Instead, as he is being whipped, he looks right into Robert Shaw's eyes while some tears of rage drop down his face. Thus he represents the spirit of Black rebellion in a regimented white man's army. His oppressed life leads him to embody contemporary attitudes, namely to speak out. In the scene when the soldiers were given out their pay vouchers, he manages not only to convince the other soldiers to refuse their pay vouchers but he also leads Robert Shaw into ripping up

his own to protest at the unequal pay the black and white soldiers received. Moreover in the last scenes, when Robert Shaw is shot and killed, Silas Trip gets up, lifts the Stars and Stripes and rallies the men until he too is killed. In his dying moment Silas Trip symbolically becomes fully American.

At no moment in the film are the audience acquainted with the past events and the reasons which led these four men to decide to fight in the war. As Robert Burgoyne states “the film uses the imagery of scarred and lacerated flesh as a historical text to be read in counterpoint or, better, to be read interlineally with the dominant narrative, like a coded message” (Burgoyne 1997: 27). As a matter of fact *Glory* has several images which foreground issues of space and power. In the final scenes of the film, which are set in the aftermath of the battle (the Fort Wagner assault), Shaw and Trip’s bodies are tipped into an open massive grave. The bodies rest in a position of intimacy, which can symbolise an accommodation impossible while both men were alive.

In the course of the film dialogue plays an essential structuring role in defining identity. Indeed the dissimilar styles of language actually characterize the two groups: whites and blacks. In the voice-over that opens the film Robert Shaw draws direct links between language, history and national identity when he compares the Civil War to the War of Independence. Besides this, the phrases he uses when addressing the recently formed black regiment are typical of the discourse of white officers. Both Robert Shaw and his colleagues’ refined speeches connote class privilege and a long, stable unified tradition. But in contrast to the unified traditions of white identity, the black soldiers exhibit a variety of dialects, verbal patterns and rhetorical styles. For instance, Thomas doesn’t understand what the patriots of Sea Island say, so Rawlins has to translate what the men say. Likewise the exaggeration and the deadpan humour used by Silas Trip is incomprehensible to the rural illiterate black boy, Jupiter. However as the film progresses, the audience is aware of the language transformation which the men of the 54th Regiment undergo. That change goes from words spoken by slaves or “niggers” to those spoken by “men”.

On the whole *Glory* depicts African Americans as necessary members of the national story suggesting that black and white history in the U.S.A determine and shape one another. This is obvious in the scene when on the night before the soldiers go into the historic and decisive battle of Fort Wagner in South Carolina, they define their collective identity by making use of the African American collective religious ceremony called – the

shout. The troops assemble around a campfire and a lead vocalist sings lyrics that transmit a double message. The story of Noah's Ark is used as an allegory of the slave ship. The lines of the song which make this relation more obvious are: "He packed the animals two by two,/ The ox and camel and kangaroo,/ He packed them in that Ark so tight,/ I couldn't get no sleep that night./". In this sense *Glory* is said to represent the narrative of the black soldiers as a drama of origins, that is, the tracing of a black lineage. Despite the story being told from the perspective of a white person, it also offers great insight into Black experience. The audience learns about the discrimination faced by the Black soldiers and the regiment inside the Union Army.

Driving Miss Daisy, directed by Australian Bruce Beresford, touches on issues of racism and prejudice which influenced American society in the days of post-World War II conservatism (1948) right through to the Civil Rights era (1973), when Black people were still considered second class citizens by many whites, mainly in the South. Hence in the course of the film radical changes has to be undergone by American society, in the figure of Miss Daisy herself.

Throughout the movie the audience has access to Miss Daisy Werthan's (Jessica Tandy) point of view through a series of relationships and emotions, since the story centres on her home life, synagogue, friends, family, fears and concerns. The story is told from her perspective and not as the title implies from Hoke Colburn's (Morgan Freeman) perspective. As a matter of fact not a word does Hoke say to anyone, except Boolie (Dan Aykroyd), about his job. There is no dramatization of his family life beyond Miss Glory's house, Miss Glory's car, Miss Daisy's life. Only in the last scenes when he doesn't drive anymore because of his age does he get a lift from his granddaughter back to Miss Daisy's house and he tells Boolie she studied Biology.

Miss Daisy is a seventy-two year-old Jewish widow who lives alone in Atlanta, Georgia. She only has one son but they don't live in the same house because she doesn't get on well with her daughter-in-law. The only people who are in her house, besides herself, are an African American housemaid called Idella (Esther Rolle) and later on her chauffeur Hoke Colburn. Miss Daisy is demanding, stern, fussy and she holds on tightly to old habits and long-held customs and beliefs, though she assumes herself to be fair and open-minded. She always makes an effort to hide her feelings and her financial situation. However, Miss

Daisy and Hoke develop a friendship based on a mutual love and respect that no legislation could ever engender.

As the movie progresses Miss Daisy's attitudes change. She teaches Hoke to read, as she was a school teacher, and when Idella dies, Miss Daisy and her family attend her funeral, though they sit at the back of the church and are the only white people in attendance. Furthermore when her synagogue is bombed, they (Hoke and Miss Daisy) are caught in the traffic jam and Hoke tells her a story about when he was eleven or twelve years old and a friend of his was hung up on a tree with his hands tied behind his back. At that moment she realizes that she is also subject to the same prejudices as Hoke.

The last scenes are fundamental for the audience to realize that at ninety-seven Miss Daisy is a completely different person. She actually dismisses her own son, Boolie, saying: "Hoke came to see me, not you!" The film ends on Thanksgiving Day and Hoke and Miss Daisy sit side-by-side at the table at the nursing home, while he feeds her a piece of pie with a spoon.

Hoke Colburn is twelve years younger than Miss Daisy and he is cunning, cool, intelligent and retains a courtly deferential manner and demeanour. Even though he is the chauffeur and at first he is not allowed to touch certain things around the house or do as he pleases, he is never servile or submissive. There is a scene when he wants to stop the car to "go make water" because in spite of having stopped at a service station he didn't go to the toilet there, for the negroes were not allowed there at the time. Despite Miss Daisy insisting for him not to stop, Hoke simply stopped the car at the side of the road, took the keys and off he went leaving her alone in the car in the dark.

Driving Miss Daisy is one of the era's most successful movies and Morgan Freeman's performance is in part responsible for that. A lesser actor would have distanced himself from his character by giving him a modern attitude. Morgan Freeman is able to transmit the "speech patterns and rhythms – movements, gestures, postures" (Bogle 2004: 315) in such a convincing way that the audience recall the African Americans of another generation.

Chapter Four

Spike Lee – a Contemporary African American filmmaker

4.1. Social and gender issues

Although some black stars appeared in hugely successful general films during the Reagan/Bush era, “it was still very difficult for African Americans to gain power within the Hollywood film industry” (Benshoff and Griffin 2004: 88). Many producers were convinced that if they made a film, it wouldn’t be distributed. Likewise investors were not willing to lose their money. ‘Spike’ Lee was determined not only to produce his own films but also to distribute them as well. Black filmmakers were convinced that they could make quality films on near-shoestring budget and still appeal to integrated audiences.

In 1986 Spike Lee’s debut film, the independently produced comedy *She’s Gotta Have It* set him at the forefront of black independent film in American cinema. This film introduces an uncomfortable issue that Hollywood has always avoided, namely portraying black sexuality in a forthright manner. According to Spike Lee “when it comes to black sexuality, they don’t know how to deal with it” (Patterson 1992: 52), so he proceeded to address the issue head-on.

She’s Gotta Have It focuses on class distinctions within black society. Hence the narrative portrays a variety of black male and female characters who have different “social interests and philosophical outlooks, pursuing their desires within the space of the black world” (Guerrero 1993: 140). It is an unconventional story of a young single graphics artist, Nola Darling (Tracy Camilla Johns) and her three lovers who are the central personalities in the film: Jamie Overstreet (Tommy Redmond Hicks), Greer Childs (John Canada Terrell) and Mars Blackmon (Spike Lee). Nola is a somewhat shallow and empty character who is far more worried about her sexual relationships than about any other aspect of her life. In contrast, the male characters are multidimensional human beings who have opinions on a wide range of topics, namely politics, sports, lifestyles, gender, among other things.

Jamie is a sensitive, confident and serious young man who longs for a monogamous relationship with Nola. So he feels frustrated with their “on again, off again” (idem: 142) relationship. But Nola is a woman who prefers a life that is free of masculine projects and expectations. As Jamie represents the established urban black middle-class and its cultural perspective, he isn’t able to accept this; he therefore sexually humiliates Nola in a rape scene.

Greer Childs is a young Buppie who drives a jaguar convertible and is obsessed with bodybuilding. As he lives in Manhattan, he is also geographically distant from the black community and he has absorbed white values. He is a narcissist who shows a lot of interest in himself and in his appearance. Before making love to Nola he spends his time folding up his clothes meticulously. He too wants a monogamous relationship and when Nola breaks up with him, he tells her he is going to find a white woman to replace her.

Mars Blackmon is a young, unemployed man who rides a ten speed and who talks, talks, talks. So Nola shares not only sex but also moments of humour with him.

In *She’s Gotta Have It* Spike Lee presents a one-dimensional male chauvinism and subverts it in terms of gendered power relations. Nola lives her life as if she was free to have the sexual choices of a man, having simultaneous relationships though all her three male lovers are informed of their mutual situation. Although Spike Lee focuses critically on black behaviour, he avoids presenting the savage, oversexed, violent one-dimensional black male. Therefore in his film the audience is acquainted with African Americans who are intelligent, independent, sincere, insincere, hard-working, and occasionally silly. Comedy operates as a mitigating force in the presentation of human limitedness.

Two years later Lee released his second feature length film, a satiric comedy, *School Daze*. Lee depicts the issue of intracolour discrimination focusing on class and graduated colour divisions within the student body at Mission College.

The film revolves around four gendered social groups: 1) the Gamma Rays, 2) the Gamma Phi Gamma, 3) Dap and “Da Fellas” and 4) the Jigaboos. The Gammities belong to the Gamma Phi Gamma fraternity of which Julian Eaves (Big Brother Almighty – Giancarlo Esposito) is the leader. Their female counterparts are the Gamma Rays and their leader is Jane Toussaint (Tisha Campbell Martin). The latter are light complexioned and have straight hair by birth or by their design. Both the Gammities and the Gamma Rays are known as Wannabees who consist of light-bright middle class black folks who are fleeing

their cultural roots, hoping to get as close to a white ideal as possible. Vaughn “Dap” Dunlap (Laurence Fishburne) and his group “Da Fellas” disapprove of fraternity rituals. They defend pan-African ideas and lead anti-apartheid demonstrations to encourage the students and the school administrators to divest from South Africa. Their female counterparts are the Jigaboos who have Afro-hairstyles, have brown to dark brown complexions and sometimes wear African clothing. Hence the Jigaboos consist mainly of browner or darker students who are shoved to the sidelines of social life at Mission College. In this sense, the division within the campus represents the political and cultural dilemma of black communities. Besides touching on intracolour discrimination, *School Daze* covers other subjects which aren’t so comprehensively developed in the film as to constitute its main themes, namely intraracial class strife, the apartheid divestment movement and the abuse of women in fraternity pledging rituals.

Mo’ Better Blues, initially titled *A Love Supreme*, was the first jazz movie directed by a black director. The movie features the hardships which black jazz musicians and composers had (and have) to face. As many of them are victims of exploitation, they are either forced to perform and compose music for the largest listening public or to live largely un-materially rewarded lives, (but without becoming doomed or drugged heroes (as such victim types often become)).

During the course of the film *Giant* (Spike Lee), the band manager, and then later Bleek Gilliam (Denzel Washington), the ordinary but talented young middle-class trumpet player, ask the Jewish club owners Moe Flatbush (John Turturro) and Josh Flatbush (Nicholas Turturro) for a raise, but their request is always turned down. These two characters were written to depict how black artists struggled against exploitation. However, The Anti-Defamation League accused Spike Lee of anti-Semitism, which he denied, justifying his position by saying that Jews run Hollywood (understandably this did not achieve its end).

Lee’s fourth film, which has a different warmth and depth from the previous ones, focuses on themes of friendship, loyalty, honesty, cause-and-effect and ultimately salvation. While having a relationship with Clarke Betencourt (Cynda Williams), a light complexioned woman with straight hair, and another at the same time with Indigo Downes (Joie Lee), a brown-skinned woman with short crinkly hair, Bleek isn’t worried about deciding which one to choose to settle down with. But when he realizes he is no longer able

to play the trumpet, a year later, he goes back to Indigo and desperately begs her to save him. It is then that he leaves his art and decides to accept his role as the father of a rather mundane middle-class family.

I will now go on to indicate the originality of theme and presentation of these films which show Spike Lee's efforts to address internal problems within the African American community. Due to his pride in his heritage, Spike Lee is determined to make movies with black-centred themes focusing on gender and social issues. The director's aim is to draw African-Americans' attention to some taboo areas which often cause conflicts and discontentment among blacks. Hence by depicting male and female relationships and the conflicts between dark-skinned and light-skinned African Americans, Spike Lee is issuing a 'wake up' call for black audience to rethink their behaviour, which many times results in self-destructive situations of violence, segregation, alienation and drug dealing. This director's films are didactic because they help the audience, in this case the black audience, become aware of a situation in which African Americans are agents, not merely victims.

4.2. Interracial issues

In *Jungle Fever* Lee carries on with the serious dramatization of New York's current racial problems, which he had already focused on in *Do The Right Thing*. Moreover he dramatizes the love-hate relationship he and other black New Yorkers have with their Italian-American neighbours.

The basis for the main story is the American taboo on interracial dating. Flipper Purify (Wesley Snipes), a very dark-complexioned successful black architect is happily married to Drew (Lonette McKee), a very light-complexioned black woman. Angela Tucci (Anabella Sciorra), who comes from the Italian working-class community of Bensonhurst in Brooklyn, is hired to work as his secretary and they eventually begin a brief love affair. Although they rent a house which is situated between black Harlem and white Bensonhurst, their relationship doesn't seem to have any support either from their friends or from their families. Flipper's friend Cyrus (Spike Lee) actually calls their affair "jungle fever", suggesting that it is an unnatural and heady sexual attraction between whites and blacks.

It is Flipper who puts an end to their relationship saying: "It's not worth it. I don't love you and I doubt it whether you love me. You were curious about black and I was

curious about white.” Furthermore he is racist to the point of claiming that he doesn’t want mulatto children: “No half white, half black babies for me. No time to have a bunch of mixed nuts.” In this way Lee emphasizes the importance that received cultural attitudes have in relationships, causing them to either thrive or perish. What is important here is the assertion of black independence, not the pursuit of white goals or ideals

Besides the interracial romance which should be considered the main story of *Jungle Fever*, there is another story which depicts drug dealing in the black community. “[S]uccessful buppie Flipper has a crack-cocaine-addicted brother” (Pouzoulet 1997: 44) called “Gator” Purify (Samuel L. Jackson) who spends his life sponging, not only on his mother, Lucinda Purify (Ruby Dee), but also on his brother Flipper. In this way *Jungle Fever* became the first film by Spike Lee to depict drug dealing as a blight within the black community.

Do the Right Thing (1989), which “became a media event that was written about as if something of a social phenomenon” (Bogle 2004: 319), closed the decade as its most controversial and provocative film about race. Lee’s third feature examines race relations, political issues, urban crime and violence, in many cases the principal causes of discontent and unexplained anger, which were part of urban life at the time. *Do the Right Thing* did what most Hollywood films avoided: it showed that race relations in America remain abysmal, as will be shown in the next section.

4.3. Racial relations

Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing* tackles the issue of racism, including violence, racial intolerance and police brutality in a humane, sensitive and convincing way. Lee’s inspiration for his film came from real life. While on the one hand he wanted to look into the Howard Beach incidents³⁴, in which blacks were killed by white racists, on the other hand he had his own autobiographical memories of being brought up black in Brooklyn. As the latter became attractive for a number of immigrant groups, there are many interracial neighbourhoods where the numbers of African-Americans and Hispanics have increased. Moreover there are also Jewish and Italian enclaves, as well as older white working class

³⁴ On the 20th December 1986 three African American men (Michael Griffith, 24; Cedric Sandiford, 36; Timothy Grimes, 20) were verbally insulted by a teen driver in a passing car. Later the teens returned with a group of seven-to-nine friends and pursued the three men. Timothy Grimes managed to escape, Cedric Sandiford was caught, assaulted and beaten and Michael Griffith was killed by a car that ran him over.

neighbourhoods, all of which were experiencing racial and economic tensions. Since Brooklyn is the home of more than half of New York City's African-American population, it has been Lee's favourite setting and location for shooting.

In an article entitled "Reviews of *Do The Right Thing*, 1989-1990", Jay Carr assures us that "his [Lee's] films clearly speak for black urban Americans who remain virtually invisible in American film" (1997: 136). In fact when Lee decided to make *Do The Right Thing* he conceived of it as a film about urban experience but from a black perspective and not simply presenting blacks as invisible or stereotyped, as Hollywood mainstream insisted on doing. Hence he refused to present the type of drug dealer and gang violence which were romanticised by many post-*Do The Right Thing* films. Instead Lee preferred to dramatise "a difficult and perplexing issue that the United States must resolve: how to reapportion psychological, social and economic space for both the individual and various racial and ethnic communities." (Grant 1997: 28-29). In this sense the black ghetto which Spike Lee chose for his setting is not affected or destroyed by poverty, unemployment and drug abuse. Furthermore, although *Do The Right Thing* is the story of a neighbourhood which is inhabited by a black underclass, there is no direct exploration of their oppressive living and working conditions throughout the film.

Do The Right Thing is set on a single street in a poor black neighbourhood in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn on the hottest day of the year. The street is populated by mainly African-Americans and Puerto Ricans. At one end of the street is Sal's pizzeria which is run by the Fragiones, an Italian-American family, and opposite it is a grocery shop owned by Koreans.

The action of the film starts slowly so the audience gets to know the community better. The characters are all very different from one another and each of them has a precise and distinct role to play within the narrative. They "represent distinctive neighborhood African-, Hispanic-, Italian-, Anglo-, and Korean-American individuals," (Kellner 1997: 78), who live in a community which lacks unity of vision. This is quite clear in Lee's montage of individuals from different collectivities who turn directly to the camera and express their opinions about each other. The long list of racial slurs about other ethnicities demonstrates the poor communication and horrible stereotyping that exists throughout that neighbourhood.

As a matter of fact, right from the very first images the audience senses that they are going to witness something disturbing due to the violent jump-cuts of a woman dancing in a frenetic style to the sound of the rap song *Fight the Power*. Moreover there is another scene where there is a girl drawing a harmonious scene, consisting of the sun shining and people smiling, but Mookie (Spike Lee) treads all over it. This implies that such harmony does not exist in that complex community.

Another important aspect to focus on is the generational tensions which also contribute to the conflicts and asocial behaviour of the characters. Both Da Mayor (Ossie Davis) and Mother Sister (Ruby Dee) represent an older generation. They are touched with “traces of a southern past, a past that has been inflected by segregation, migration and changing political and aesthetic ideologies in the American community and in the American society at large”. (Massood 2003: 142). As far as the younger generations are concerned Da Mayor stands for the ineffectiveness of his generation as a whole, since he is alcoholic, unemployed and wears soiled clothing. However, most people are affectionate with him and respect him as being a valued pronouncer of worldly wisdom. He shows a sense of integrity which seems to transcend the politics of race. After Radio Raheem’s death he tries to restore order by saying “Good people, let’s all go home...if we don’t stop this now, we’ll all regret it.”

Mister Señor Love Daddy (Samuel Jackson) and the Three Corner men: ML (Paul Benjamin), Coconut Sid (Frankie Faison) and Sweet Dick Willie (Robin Harris), belong to the intermediate generation. The former is the local disc jockey who oversees the community and comments on what’s going on. From the first images he goes on repeating “Wake up”, not only because it is morning but also for the community to “do the right thing” and wake up to the nature of their lives. This trio of black men are the film’s Greek Chorus, as they spend their day sitting under a beach umbrella commenting on what is going around them. But they themselves don’t do anything to change the situation which they criticise. For instance, ML is against the presence of a Korean- owned market in their neighbourhood since many African-Americans in the community are jobless. In reality the only African Americans who have jobs are Mookie and Mister Señor Love Daddy. However, none of the three has the courage and the determination to make a difference.

Finally the younger generation is embodied by Mookie, Buggin Out (Giancarlo Esposito), Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn), Smiley (Roger Guenveur Smith), Jade (Loie Lee),

Tina (Rosie Perez) and many young neighbourhood residents, who represent apathetic black youth in urban America.

Mookie is an unambitious young delivery man who lives with his sister Jade and works at Sal's pizzeria, which has a predominantly black clientele. He is unmotivated, lazy and, according to his girlfriend Tina, he isn't a responsible father to his son, Hector. His only motivation seems to be his desire to get paid. In the course of the film Mookie is constantly asking Salvatore "Sal" Fragione (Danny Aiello) for his pay. After Sal's pizzeria is burnt down he goes back to receive his weekly salary. Though initially he refuses to take one hundred dollar bills, which Sal has angrily crumpled up, he ends up picking all the money up from the sidewalk.

Mookie is respected by most of the African-American and Puerto Rican residents of his neighbourhood. Besides this he is constantly reminded by Buggin Out to "Stay black" and by Da Mayor to "Do the right thing". By wearing a Jackie Robinson baseball shirt and talking "brother talk" to the locals, Mookie is able to bridge the white and black communities. Therefore when he works he wears a shirt with both his name and the logo of Sal's pizzeria on it, which signifies his position between the two worlds. Hence Mookie is a mediating character who is put in the middle of two races and who tries to ease the racial hate and anger between Sal and the two black teenagers who represent a new generation of black urban toughs: Radio Raheem and Buggin Out.

When Radio Raheem is choked to death by a police officer, it is precisely Mookie who tosses a trash can through the pizzeria window exclaiming the word "HATE." On the one hand he was angry about the needless death of his friend Radio Raheem, who frequently expressed his love for him saying "I love you, man." But on the other hand he manages to spare Sal and his sons' lives by attracting the attention of the mob, who "mindlessly and spontaneously reacts by burning the pizzeria" (Guerrero 1993: 154), which to them is a major symbol of white power. Since on the previous day there was no "collective, organized follow-through" (idem), that day's behaviour only proved to be a futile political action. After all Sal has insurance therefore he will have his pizzeria rebuilt if he wishes. That is, the relations of domination will remain exactly the same. In this way both Sal's pizzeria and the Korean grocery are constructed as obstacles to the success of black communities, for they are Other-controlled businesses serving a black community.

Buggin Out is a young nonworking militant who has social awareness but is misdirected in his activism since he wastes his energy on lost causes. He tries to organize a boycott of Sal's pizzeria by convincing the community to join him. His demand is for Sal to put up some "brothers" along with the American Italians on his Wall of Fame. Buggin Out doesn't accept the fact that the pizzeria's clientele is black but still African Americans have no place on that wall, which for him "signifies exclusion from the public sphere". (Mitchell 1997: 110).

Radio Raheem is a young man who speaks very few words and only lives to blast Public Enemy's *Fight the Power* on his giant boom box. Apart from the entry credits, the song is only played when Radio Raheem appears. *Fight the Power* represents Black male pride, independence and uncompromising strength while its powerful lyrics knock down America's favourite cultural heroes, namely Elvis Presley and John Wayne. In *Do The Right Thing* music articulates cultural identity in such a way that it leads to cultural clashes and divisions within the ghetto. There is actually a scene where Radio Raheem battles with Stevie (Luis Ramos) and four Spanish friends over who has the loudest beat-box.

Salvatore "Sal" Frangione, the pizzeria's Italian-American owner, is probably the most complex character of the film. He tries to be a tough proprietor who decides who has the right to be displayed on his Wall of Fame and what type of music can be heard in his business; after all he is the owner of the property. In that sense, it is a clash over for whom American is run: those who own it (unambiguously whites) or those who live in it (unpropertied labouring minorities)? However, Sal wants to get along with everyone, especially with "these people" who are a clientele that has been living on his slices of pizza for twenty-five years. In other words his attitude of denying his own racism while struggling to satisfy his clientele, even when the pizzeria is already closed, actually represents white America's refusal to see or even admit the racism that is still a reality both in contemporary America and in themselves. Sal and his sons live in Bensonhurst and they drive to work everyday. His eldest son Giuseppe, better known as Pino (John Turturro), the "stone-cold racist" (Page 1997: 141), hates both the place and the neighbourhood and insists on calling the neighbourhood locals "niggers" behind their backs. He "detests the place like a sickness" though he loves Prince, Dwight Gooden and Magic Johnson. According to him, the latter are not just Black, they are more than Black, thus exposing the crazy illogicality in racist thinking.

Pino's younger brother [who doesn't possess a name] contrasts completely with him for he simply looks at people as being human beings and doesn't understand racial differences. Even though he is frequently bullied by his elder brother, he refuses to confront him. Therefore he represents those White Americans who witness racist behaviour around them and, yet despite knowing it is wrong, don't do anything to alter the situation.

Do The Right Thing, like most of Lee's films, has the aim of provoking and leading the audience to discussion, especially those who believe that racial issues were settled after the Civil Rights Movement. Lee's message doesn't only criticise whites for their racism because in the film no one actually does "the right thing"; no one is perfect. Furthermore Lee himself challenges the Black community to wake up and create their own business opportunities. At the end of the feature the audience is given two quotes, representing two choices: one from Martin Luther King Jr. (against violence) and the other from Malcolm X (the right to self-defence). Lee points out to the audience the two possible directions black anger can take.

4.4. Spike Lee's groundbreaking effort

Lee's most ambitious and most controversial film, *Malcolm X* (1992) was based on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X and Alex Haley. When Lee agreed to be the director of *Malcolm X*, he immediately assured everyone it was going to be *his* vision of Malcolm X, and thus avoiding the conventional features of the biopic. Other cinematic effects would be used which undercut the realist/historicist style, namely the use of different film stocks and freeze frames.

Malcolm X was made predominantly and purposefully by African-Americans, so whites are portrayed as being the ones who should be charged with being the greatest murderers and kidnappers on earth. Thus in the course of the film Malcolm X makes powerful and damning accusations against white men. Everywhere they have gone, they have created hell and destruction. As white men have been wicked, they have never allowed African Americans the opportunity to share their rights and material well-being. In other words, *Malcolm X* is a movie which is against an entire race.

In *Malcolm X* the life of the African-American activist is divided into three parts. The first part deals with Malcolm's difficult childhood up to the time when he is imprisoned. During this period Malcolm X is a victim of the white man because he loses his

father, who is believed to have been murdered by white supremacists; his mother is institutionalised and both Malcolm and his siblings are taken from her and put into foster care. Later “Red” leads the life of a street hustler, experiencing the white man’s poison: drugs, and so on.

The second part focuses on Little’s life in prison in Massachusetts when his fellow inmate, Baines (Albert Hall) introduces him to the teachings of the Nation of Islam. When he leaves prison he meets Elijah Muhammad (Al Freeman Jr.) and he becomes his minister. Therefore he goes out into the streets and preaches the doctrine of separatism from white society. Furthermore he criticizes the non-violent approach of the Civil Rights Movement. As a matter of record, he refers to Martin Luther King as an Uncle Tom negro leader. However, he becomes disillusioned with Elijah’s attitudes, departs from his mission and he ends up being forced to stop preaching in the name of Elijah. During this period he became a figure on the American national stage, albeit for whites a hate figure

In the third part, Malcolm X goes on a pilgrimage to Mecca, where he meets many Muslims from all races and he consequently softens his beliefs. He confesses he is no longer a racist. All that he longs for is freedom, justice and equality. He regrets having caused injuries to whites who do not deserve it. In this last part Malcolm X is represented as a father-figure. In the last scenes Lee uses the Brechtian convention of breaking the dramatic illusion (as Spielberg does at the end of *Schindler’s List* (1993) - to pay tribute to Holocaust survivors and their families). Lee insists on the connection between Soweto and Harlem, Nelson Mandela and Malcolm X, to try to build a bridge between all people of colour. This final gesture is also not without some *Dead Poets Society* (1989) tackiness as well. This suggests Malcolm’s fight wasn’t in vain and that the younger generations are willing to carry on the fight which he began decades before.

Malcolm X is probably Spike Lee’s most polemic films because it transmits radical messages to black and white audiences alike. On the one hand he blames the white man for being racist and for the oppression which African Americans have been subject to for centuries. Therefore he includes a sequence of shocking scenes in which white men are killing or beating innocent black men. On the other hand, Spike Lee also criticises those African Americans who try to emulate white men’s lifestyles by dying their hair and even wearing fancy clothes. By adopting such behaviour they are only helping the individuals in

power to oppress black people. According to him, African Americans should be proud of their race and ethnicity.

In 1986 Spike Lee began the “new wave” in black films, and from then onwards, major studios and their black directors and writers have been imitating his black film style by borrowing his use of black speech, rap music and funky dress. It follows therefore that apart from transforming the representation of African-American urban community life and black filmmaking practices, Spike Lee has also made a contribution to changing American filmmaking as a whole.

Conclusion

“Slavery is the founding historical relationship between blacks and whites in America” (Guerrero 1993: 3).

As epitomized by Malcolm X’s remark about Plymouth Rock landing on his people, not the other way round, African Americans have always been repressed, marginalized and subordinated. Many in the late 20th century have shared Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream, but it was only in 2009 that Barack Obama was elected the 44th President of the U.S.A. It is a measure of how far they have come that although African Americans have figured in film culture since the early days of filmmaking, they have been circumscribed and confined to certain roles such as: maids, butlers, thieves, coons, mammies, among others.

American mainstream cinema builds a ‘reality’ in which the dominant ideas, feelings and attitudes of a specific time are incorporated into fictional narratives which are at the service of the system, have to be appealing to or manipulative of the prejudices of mass popular audiences. Demeaning stereotypes have always been used to portray African Americans. Blacks have found themselves associated with the idea of their own inferiority, positioned as incapable of improving themselves, and when they so obviously did just that, as in the cases of Jack Johnson, Jesse Owen, Paul Robeson and many more, their achievements were ignored or denigrated. All the while whites possessed hegemonic political and economic authority, their representation as superior was never called into question.

As a reaction to the inhumane depictions of African-American life and culture, many films were released by African American filmmakers. However as the film industry was controlled by whites, and the black filmmakers did not possess the required financial investment, the black man’s viewpoint did not and could not break through.

In the mid-eighties Spike Lee challenged Hollywood codes and insisted on representing practices which were either repressed or inflected towards stereotypic genre contexts in mainstream cinema. The characters in his films are ordinary street blacks who speak and act in a way unfiltered by ‘white’ conventions, most notably in the political and sexual attitudes they display. Thus Lee has been able to change not only the way Hollywood views African Americans but also change their place in the movie industry. Spike Lee’s film success has stimulated a new wave of black filmmakers who have been

telling black stories: Robert Townsend, Keenan Ivory Wayans, Leslie Harris, Julie Dash, Mario Van Peebles and the brothers Allen and Albert Hughes. All these filmmakers have taken up the project of discarding past racist stereotypes by placing black characters and black dilemmas at the centre of their films.

While in the eighties mainstream films omitted, ignored or disguised race, it was precisely in this decade that many African Americans made their mark in Hollywood, namely Eddie Murphy, Morgan Freeman, Denzel Washington, to say nothing of a legion of black character actors. Despite these successes, it can't be said that blacks were able to cross over to occupy the roles traditionally attributed to white actors because they were still outnumbered by white characters, who had roles of control and authority.

Nevertheless in the later 90s and the decade just finishing more and more black actors have been able to take lead roles in mainstream cinema. For instance, in *Deep Impact* (1998), and in a number of other films, Morgan Freeman plays the President of the U.S.A. In *Bruce Almighty* (2005), he plays God. In *I am Legend* (2004) Will Smith is a virologist who is trying to find the cure for cancer and in *I, Robot* (2004) he is a technophobic cop who investigates a crime. Both films deal with issues which are of the interest of a wider group, and constitute big budget investments riding on their star. In view of Americans' well-known cultural investment in such figures, it's surely of interest that both Wesley Snipes in the *Blade* (1998) franchise and Will Smith in *Hancock* (2008) get to play superheroes as well as more mortal and mundane action heroes

From this perspective, and as I have tried to show throughout this work, representations of African Americans have undergone changes; nevertheless when analyzed closely, it is probably the case that blacks still occupy positions of inferiority relative to their white counterparts. However, as Bogle asserts "Yesterday may not have been great. But the talents of some extraordinary past black film artists make us believe that tomorrow has to be better" (2004: 433). After all, present-day Americans are living in the age of Barak Obama, whose motto is "Yes, we can".

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Filmography

Specific Filmography

Beverly Hills Cop

(1984, U.S., 105 min)

Director: Martin Brest

Production Company: Paramount / Don Simpson / Jerry Bruckheimer

Cast: Eddie Murphy, Judge Reinhold, John Ashton

Cry Freedom

(1987, U.S., 157 min)

Director: Richard Attenborough

Production Company: Universal Pictures / Marble Arch Productions

Cast: Kevin Kline, Denzel Washington, Kate Hardie

Color Purple, The

(1985, U.S., 154 min)

Director: Steven Spielberg

Production Company: Amblin Entertainment / Guber-Peters Company / Warner Bros Pictures

Cast: Danny Glover, Whoopi Goldberg, Margaret Avery

Coming to America

(1988, U.S., 117 min)

Director: John Landis

Production Company: UIP / Paramount

Cast: Eddie Murphy, James Earl Jones, Arsenio Hall

Do the Right Thing

(1989, U.S., 120 min)

Director: Spike Lee

Production Company: UIP / Forty Acres And A Mule Filmworks / Spike Lee

Cast: Danny Aiello, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee

Die Hard

(1988, U.S., 132 min)

Director: John McTiernen

Production Company: Fox / Gordon Company / Silver Pictures

Cast: Bruce Willis, Alan Rickman, Alexander Godunov

Driving Miss Daisy

(1989, U.S., 99 min)

Director: Bruce Beresford

Production Company: Zanuck Company, The / Majestic Films International

Cast: Morgan Freeman, Jessica Tandy, Dan Aykroyd

48 Hours

(1982, U.S., 97 min)

Director: Walter Hill

Production Company: Paramount / Lawrence Gordon

Cast: Nick Nolte, Eddie Murphy, Annette O'Toole

Glory

(1989, U.S., 133 min)

Director: Edward Zwick

Production Company: Columbia Tri-Star

Cast: Matthew Broderick, Denzel Washington, Cary Elwes

Jungle Fever

(1991, U.S., 132 min)

Director: Spike Lee

Production Company: Forty Acres And a Mule Filmworks

Cast: Wesley Snipes, Annabella Sciorra, Spike Lee

Lethal Weapon

(1987, U.S., 109min)

Director: Richard Donner

Production Company: Warner / Richard Donner

Cast: Mel Gibson, Danny Glover, Gary Busey

Lethal Weapon 2

(1989, U.S., 114 min)

Director: Richard Donner

Production Company: Warner / Silver Pictures

Cast: Mel Gibson, Danny Glover, Joe Pesci

Malcolm X

(1992, U.S., 201 min)

Director: Spike Lee

Production Company: 40 Acres & a Mule Filmworks / JVC Entertainment / Largo International

Cast: Denzel Washington, Angela Bassett, Albert Hall

Mississippi Burning

(1988, U.S., 127 min)

Director: Ala Parker

Production Company: Rank / Orion

Cast: Gene Hackman, Willem Dafoe, Frances McDormand

Mo' Better Blues

(1990, U.S., 129 min)

Director: Spike Lee

Production Company: Universal Pictures / 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks

Cast: Denzel Washington, Spike Lee, Wesley Snipes

School Daze

(1988, U.S., 121 min)

Director: Spike Lee

Production Company: 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks / Columbia Pictures Corporation

Cast: Laurence Fishburne, Giancarlo Esposito, Spike Lee

She's Gotta Have It

(1986, U.S., 85 min)

Director: Spike Lee

Production Company: 40 Acres & a Mule Filmworks

Cast: Tracy Camilla Johns, Tommy Redmond Hicks, John Canada Terrell

Trading Places

(1983, U.S., 116 min)

Director: John Landis

Production Company: Paramount / Landis-Folsey

Cast: Dan Aykroyd, Eddie Murphy, Ralph Bellamy

Secondary Filmography**Anniversary Trouble**

(1935, U.S., 20 min)

Director: Gus Meins

Another 48 Hours

(1990, U.S., 96 min)

Director: Walter Hill

Babes in Arms

(1939, U.S., 93 min)

Director: Busby Berkeley

Band of Angels

(1957, U.S., 125 min)

Director: Raoul Walsh

Barber, The

(1912, U.S.)

Director: William Foster

Betrayal, The

(1948, U.S., 183 min)

Director: Oscar Micheaux

Birth of a Nation, The
(1915, U.S., 13, 058ft)
Director: D.W. Griffith

Birth of a Race, The
(1918, U.S.)
Director: John W. Noble

Blackboard Jungle, The
(1955, U.S., 101 min)
Director: Richard Brooks

Blade
(1998, U.S., 120 min)
Director: Stephen Norrington

Blood of Jesus, The
(1944, U.S., 57 min)
Director: Spencer Williams

Body and Soul
(1924, U.S., 102 min)
Director: Oscar Micheaux

Brewster's Millions
(1985, U.S., 97 min)
Director: Walter Hill

Bruce Almighty
(200, U.S., 101 min)
Director: Tom Shadyac

By Right of Birth
(1921, U.S.)
Director: Harry A. Gant

Cabin in the Sky
(1943, U.S., 98 min)
Director: Vincente Minnelli

Carolina
(1934, U.S., 85 min)
Director: Henry King

Dark Manhattan
(1937, U.S., 70 min)
Director: Harry L. Fraser

Dead Poets Society

(1989, U.S., 128 min)

Director: Peter Weir

Deep Impact

(1998, U.S., 121 min)

Director: Mimi Leder

Defiant Ones, The

(1958, U.S., 96 min)

Director: Stanley Kramer

Edge of the City

(1957, U.S., 85 min)

Director: Martin Ritt

Emperor Jones, The

(1933, U.S., 72 min)

Director: Dudley Murphy

Everybody Sing

(1957, U.S., 91 min)

Director: Edwin L. Marin

Fall Guy, The

(1912, U.S.)

Director: William Foster

Gangsters on the Loose

(1938, U.S.)

Director: Harry L. Fraser

Go Down, Death!

(1944, U.S., 56 min)

Director: Spencer Williams

Gone With the Wind

(1939, U.S., 222 min)

Director: Victor Fleming

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

(1967, U.S., 108 min)

Director: Stanley Kramer

Hallelujah

(1929, U.S., 106 min)

Director: King Vidor

Hancock

(2008, U.S., 92 min)

Director: Peter Berg

Hearts in Dixie

(1929, U.S., 71 min)

Director: Paul H. Sloan

Home of the Brave

(1949, U.S.)

Director: Mark Robson

Homesteader, The

(1919, U.S.)

Director: Oscar Micheaux

I am Legend

(2007, U.S., 101 min)

Director: Francis Lawrence

Imitation of Life

(1934, U.S., 111 min)

Director: John M. Stahl

Intruder in the Dust

(1949, U.S., 87 min)

Director: Clarence Brown

I, Robot

(2004, U.S., 115 min)

Director: Alex Proyas

Jazz Singer, The

(1927, U.S., 89 min)

Director: Alan Crosland

Judge Priest

(1934, U.S., 80 min)

Director: John Ford

Juke Point

(1947, U.S., 69 min)

Director: Spencer Williams

Lethal Weapon 3

(1992, U.S., 118 min)

Director: Richard Donner

Lethal Weapon 4

(1998, U.S., 127 min)

Director: Richard Donner

Lost Boundaries

(1949, U.S., 99 min)

Director: Alfred L. Werker

Man's Duty, A

(1919, U.S.)

Director: Harry A. Gant

No Time for Comedy

(1940, U.S., 93 min)

Director: William Keighley

No Way Out

(1950, U.S., 106 min)

Director: Joseph L. Mankiewicz

Pinky

(1949, U.S., 102 min)

Director: Elia Kazan

Prince of his Race, A

(1926, U.S.)

Director: Roy Calnek

Railroad Porter, The

(1912, U.S.,)

Director: William Foster

Raisin in the Sun

(1961, U.S., 128)

Director: Daniel Petrie

Realization of the Negro's Ambition, The

(1916, U.S.)

Director: Harry A. Gant

Reform School

(1939, U.S., 58 min)

Director: Leo C. Popkin

Roman Scandals

(1933, U.S., 92 min)

Director: Frank Tuttle

Scar of Shame, The
(1927, U.S., 68 min)
Director: Frank Peregrini

Schindler's List
(1993, U.S., 195 min)
Director: Steven Spielberg

See no Evil, Hear no evil
(1989, U.S., 103 min)
Director: Arthur Hiller

Sergeant Rutledge
(1960, U.S., 111 min)
Director: John Ford

Shaft
(1971, U.S., 100 min)
Director: Gordon Parks

Silver Streak
(1976, U.S., 114 min)
Director: Arthur Hiller

Something of Value
(1957, U.S., 113 min)
Director: Richard Brooks

Stir Crazy
(1980, U.S., 111 min)
Director: Sidney Poitier

Stormy Weather
(1943, U.S., 78 min)
Director: Andrew L. Stone

Superfly
(1972, U.S., 98 min)
Director: Gordon Parks Jr.

Sweetback's Baadasssss Song
(1971, U.S., 97 min)
Director: Melvin Van Peebles

To Kill a Mockingbird
(1962, U.S., 129 min)
Director: Robert Mulligan

Toy, the

(1982, U.S., 102 min)

Director: Richard Donner

Trooper of Troop K

(1918, U.S.)

Director: Harry A. Gant

While Thousands Cheer

(1940, U.S.)

Director: Leo C. Popkin

Within Our Gates

(1920, U.S.)

Director: Oscar Micheaux